

## Ruby

### Chapter 18 - Partial

**“Any trouble, aim and squeeze the trigger. Always two shots, even if the first seems to have done the job.”**

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The desert was still quite cool, it was a brutal environment in the summer, but it wasn't quite yet spring in Turkmenistan. George felt quite comfortable in his uniform. It had been designed for all terrains and climates and was obviously worth the expense. A little earlier, one of the team had reported seeing an object explode in the sky. He was unclear about the distance and a three man team sent to investigate, had found nothing.

“They're worked up for a fight and jumping at shadows.” Terry had said.

“I like them over cautious,” said George, “they won't miss anything.”

It was two hours later and Terry had just spotted a small group of men, trudging across the sand.

“Might be the locals Sir.” Said Terry

The four men hadn't reached the settlement yet, but George zoomed in the binoculars and saw the men in detail. They were trudging rather than walking, they had the look of tired men. Their clothing looked tattered and they rarely looked up from the ground.

“You might be right,” said George, “but there is no other settlement for miles, so where have they been ?”

“Scavenging along the coast ?”

“Maybe.”

Three men in front and one slightly taller man behind. There was something about the limp the man at the rear walked with, something familiar. He lifted his head to shout something at the men in front and George recognised Max. He was bald now and far less well-groomed than the last time they'd met, but there was no doubt about it, it was Max.

“I know him, the one at the back. He used to work for me.”

Terry was looking at him and reaching to get the glasses back.

“Who is he ?” He asked.

“Max Krause, though everyone knows his him as just Max. The last time he contacted me, he was threatening to kill Ruby. I'm not really surprised to see him here; he's a very resourceful man.”

Terry was still watching Max and his miniature army, when Sarge crept over and joined them.

“Are they to be considered as hostiles ?” He asked.

“I think Max may be here as an enemy, but the others might simply be locals. He can be very persuasive, or he might have bought their loyalty.” Replied George.

Sarge was looking at Terry, exchanging a look and a quick nod of the head.

“They haven't seen us,” said Terry, “we could easily take care of the problem, if you wanted ?”

Terry was advocating slaughter and it was obvious that Sarge was in agreement. Well why not ? Max had been a thorn in his side for quite some time, so why not kill him ? Something inside George rebelled against the idea of simply gunning down four men, without giving them a chance.

“The other three may be completely unaware of why Max is here.” He said.

“They're heading for the two storey building Sir,” said Sarge, “if they get in there, we lose the advantage. I strongly advice dealing with them now.”

He was still being called Sir, he was still in charge, but George knew things might change once the firing started.

"No," he said, "I owe Max a chance. I'll try to talk to him and I'll go unarmed."

Terry was shaking his head like crazy and taking George's automatic out of its holster.

"Leave the rifle behind if you like, but have this in your hand. It isn't as provocative as an assault rifle and you can keep it pointed at the ground..... here."

Terry made sure a bullet was in the chamber and that the safety catch was off. He then gave the weapon back to George.

"Any trouble, aim and squeeze the trigger. Always two shots, even if the first seems to have done the job."

George stood, expecting a shout and perhaps gunfire. Nothing, he looked at the approaching men and they were showing no caution at all. He walked from behind the wall and took a good dozen steps and still there was no challenge or sign they'd noticed him.

"Max," he called, "it's me, George, George Polandrous."

They all stopped walking and looked at him and George wondered what he was doing in a desert so far from home. He was a financier, he made sure hedge funds were located in just the right offshore account. He wasn't a fighter ! George looked straight at Max and tightened his grip on the automatic.

"You're a long way from home George." Shouted Max.

George carried on walking, getting himself to within talking range, shouting always sounded intuitively aggressive. Max looked awful, but he was smiling at him. The three men in front of him kept their faces down, almost as though they were..... George suddenly realised they might be unwilling allies.

"Go home Max," said George, "your services are no longer required, I'll take it from here."

Max began to raise his rifle and shots came from the direction of George's people. All hell broke loose and George flung himself forward onto the sand and rolled to his left. The other three men might have been unwilling allies of Max, but someone was firing at them now. George looked up and saw them finding cover and firing back, they were now definitely enemies. Max was gone, no blood, no body, it looked like he'd managed to get clean away. There was a popping sound as several canisters went off quite close to him. Tear gas of some kind, Sarge was obviously trying to create a diversion of sorts. George crawled along the ground to the single storey stone building and pushed the door.... Locked. A bullet hit the wall only a foot above his head, so he ducked and rolled once more, trying to get behind the building. George was now grateful for the fitness training in Cyprus, but he was beginning to breathe heavily.

"Put your weapon down, now !" Said George.

The man showed no sign of understanding English; he began to lift the gun he was carrying. He spat something at George in a language George didn't know and brought the gun right up, level with his shoulder. George lifted and fired the automatic with a speed and accuracy that surprised himself. The pirate didn't get knocked over or fly backwards, George knew that was a pure fiction and only happened in bad TV shows. A red mark began to grow over the left part of his shirt and he shouted more unintelligible words at George. Two shots at least Terry had told him, so George fired again, the second bullet hitting the man in the throat.

"I'm sorry, very sorry." Said George.

He didn't wait for the man to drown in his own blood, or die from the bullet in his chest. George stepped round the dying man and walked to the other side of the building and tried the other

door..... Locked. He decided to try one of the closest yurts, anything to get under cover. Max was in front of him an AR16 aimed at his head. George had no idea what weapon Max held, he just knew that it looked professional and dangerous.

“Fuck you George.”

Max pulled the trigger and the rifle just clicked at him, a loud audible click that George took as a sign that maybe he wasn't destined to die in a one horse settlement in the arsehole of the world. He raised the automatic, but Max was faster, ramming the butt of the AR16 against George's forehead. Then came a feeling of falling and darkness that carried on forever.

He couldn't have been unconscious for long; the battle was still going on, the sound of small arms fire mixing with the occasional pop of a tear gas grenade. George still had his automatic; it was on the ground right next to his hand. Had Max so little respect for his abilities, that he'd leave him alive and armed? Or was Max offering a chance to an old friend ?

“Over here Mr Polandrous, quickly !”

George rolled over and a young girl was in the doorway of the yurt. He didn't expect her to be dressed in local costume, but he was surprised, she was dressed in GAP. Not scruffy GAP, the universal uniform of rebellious youth. She was dressed in smart and pressed GAP, it looked newly bought from the shop. The girl looked about fifteen, her hair a mass of red curls and she'd spoken in perfect English, so George prepared to stand and walk over to her.

“No ! Get down.” She called.

A notch appeared in the ridge of sand in front of him and George knew that he'd avoided a second bullet with his name on it. He wriggled, it was undignified but safe. He wriggled on his belly and then rolled on his side where the ridge of sand no longer provided cover. He was now quite close to the yurt and the girl in crisp fresh GAP.

“Who are you ?” He asked.

“My name is Eugenie, Ruby sent me to fetch you.”

“Ruby !”

He risked getting up on his elbows and was rewarded by another puff of sand from the top of the ridge. It was annoying, he couldn't see any attacker, but they obviously knew where he was.

“Please Sir,” the girl said, “keep down, Ruby would be mortified to lose you.”

Mortified, what fifteen year old kids used words like mortified ?

“How do I get to you ?” He asked.

“You need to be quick Sir. I'll tell you when and then you need to get up and run here. Do you understand ?”

“Yes of course I do, I'm not stupid.”

She looked upset and he felt sorry for barking at her. Eugenie looked past him and he heard the sound of a scream. A serious scream, the kind of scream only agony or impending death can pull out of someone's lips. He knew the sweet fifteen year old had probably just killed someone, he was certain, perhaps it was the man sniping at him.

“Now, run Sir. Run !”

His hip objected to the amount of strain he'd been putting on it lately and gave him a stab of pain. George ignored it and forced himself up on his feet. He'd never crossed ten feet so fast in his life and he was through the flap that acted as a door for the yurt. Eugenie laughed and held his hand.

“Now we go to join the others.” She said.

There seemed to be mist in the yurt, a red mist that obscured his vision. For some reason he trusted Eugenie and allowed her to take him into the mist and then he felt himself falling again.

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Ruby clambered through the window and fell part of the way to the floor. Something scuttled away from her; she'd obviously invaded the home of some kind of desert creature.

"Are you alright?" Called Olga.

"Yes, but I just ripped my only decent jeans."

Olga clambered through the window and then the others, one by one until they were all inside the ruined building. Leo actually had a penlight in his pack, which he used to investigate the unsettling scuttling sound.

"I didn't know there were scorpions here." Said Sarah.

"They're deadly, stay away from them." Answered Serge.

There seemed to be dozens of the creatures, all clustering against the eastern wall, the one getting the most heat from the morning sun. Leo swung his light around and they all saw the strange red mist at the back of the building.

"That," said Ruby, "is our invitation."

She walked into the mist, the others following her without comment. There was a feeling of falling and when the mist cleared, they were in the same room. The scorpions still scuttled over the eastern wall, but now there was a large arched entrance at the back of the room, which hadn't been there before. Through the archway was a courtyard, with an intricate mosaic floor and beyond it a vast garden. Ruby walked into the courtyard, her friends following her, all of them loaded down with bags and weapons that now seemed superfluous.

"Are we still..... on Earth?" Asked Sarah.

"Oh yes, we're still in Karakum." Replied Ruby.

She dropped her things and walked into the garden, leaving her friends to look at the shimmering wall and the desert of Turkmenistan beyond it. Hidden by the arts of the most gifted of the Das Geheimnis, the small sanctuary could only be seen or entered by invitation and few were ever invited. She picked a fruit from the tree, enjoying the coolness of the fruit. Ruby knew it was safe to eat, but her vocal chords weren't equipped to pronounce its name. She reverted to the practise of explorers everywhere, biting into it and calling to her friends;

"It's an apple like fruit and it's delicious."

There was a fountain in the centre of the garden, with crystal clear water. It rose high up into the air and then the water fell into a round pool, which fed a stream that ran the whole length of the sanctuary.

"Is this safe to eat?" Asked Serge.

His lips were already moist from the apple like fruit and he held something with a hard skin.

"Yes, it's citrus, it'll taste like an Orange."

Sarah held up a pear type fruit, while Olga asked about a strange fruit that resembled a Gooseberry, but it was huge and far more furry.

"Everything in this garden is safe for your friends to eat."

Sarah gasped as the male creature walked towards Ruby, seeming to appear out of nowhere. Two eyes, two legs, two arms, he was definitely like them, but a lot of things about him were very different. Ruby noticed the eyes most, they were kind, but no human had ever had eyes like his. He moved forward and hugged her and repulsion turned to affection. Ruby had never felt so comforted, so secure. Her friends stopped staring and carried on eating fruit and drinking from the fountain. The man let her go and Ruby was stood in front of the first member of the people of the Black Sand that she'd met.

"It was all us you know," he said, "agriculture, farming, living in fixed settlements. We even taught the humans how to build with stone blocks."

Ruby bit into her fruit and felt conscious that her hair was a mess and her jeans were ripped. She remembered feeling the same when she discovered a ladder in her stockings before giving a presentation for George.

"There is so much I want to ask you." She said.

"Oh, Kurt will tell you everything, no rush, he's in the Tower of Inisuss. When you've eaten, go and see him."

He was walking away and there was so much she wanted to know, had to know. For a start, where and what was the Tower of Inisuss ?

"He always wanders off just as it gets interesting."

Ruby turned and a girl of about fifteen was behind her. A normal girl with mop of red curls and dressed as though she was on her way to school. The girl thrust out her right hand to be shaken.

"I'm Eugenie."

Ruby shook her hand, it felt surreal and then she remembered Kallina's picture of a child born in Paris in about eighteen thirty.

"I thought you were only a child." Said Ruby.

Eugenie laughed and picked an apple type fruit, pronouncing the tortuous vowels of its name perfectly.

"Ahh you've seen Kallina's photo collection. She has a rather unique way of viewing the flow of time."

"I noticed."

They were both laughing and more children were arriving, coming out of the trees, all of them in their mid to late teens. They all looked happy and friendly, talking to her friends, one boy actually flirting with Sarah. It was all wrong, it wasn't supposed to happen like this. In her mind she'd imagined meeting Kurt and then meeting the children, real children. Children no older than ten, who she could help by..... doing whatever Kurt thought needed doing. Ruby watched a girl of about seventeen offering Spider an ugly purple fruit and she had a moment of sharp realisation. This was perfect, the chaotic meeting with her friends was how it should be. Not a sterile meeting under controlled conditions, but a picnic with laughter and someone pulling at her arm;

"I forgot Ruby," said Eugenie, "I brought your friend George here. He was at the old settlement and in some danger. He's now with Kurt in the tower."

Ruby's head spun, what the hell was George doing anywhere near Karakum ?

"Is he unhurt ?" She asked.

"Yes he's fine and some of the elders had already visited the settlement and frightened away the few people living there. You know..... Grrrr."

Eugenie was showing her teeth and holding up her arms like a bear about to pounce. They both laughed and Ruby felt at ease, really at ease, for the first time since leaving Hackney.

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Foxy had called, telling her not to worry, which of course made her worry even more. It seemed she was to expect a visit by the police, George was now a suspected terrorist.

"A what ?"

"Don't worry Penny," he'd said, "I'm sending my three best people over."

Three men had arrived quite quickly, the leader introducing himself simply as Hugh.

“Open the door when the police arrive,” said Hugh, “but say nothing, don’t even acknowledge their presence. We will take care of everything.”

An hour later it seemed as though every police car and van in London was in front of their office building, Penny almost expected a helicopter to land on the roof. The security on the front desk simply let them in, it takes real bravery to try and stop fifty or so excited cops. The lift helped Penny, it eased up the shock and awe to six overweight Special Branch officers. They tried to look fierce as they approached her, but they were breathing heavily and Penny felt no fear.

“We have a warrant to search these premises and remove any computers and records that we feel may assist us in our enquiries.”

He thrust a fist full of papers at her, which Penny ignored. She simply went back to her desk and left them to their own devices. Younger police came by the stairs, the younger fitter ones with cases full of tools and an eager gleam in their eyes. They began looking at the computers and pulling plugs out of walls.

“Stop !!”

Hugh appeared from the kitchen, steaming mug of coffee still in his hand. He showed no form of ID and didn’t introduce himself, but he was recognised. All the police did stop, while Hugh put down his coffee and approached the Special Branch officers. They argued, Hugh merely smiled and spoke to them in a low clear voice.

“If necessary I can use the security services to clear your people from the building.” He said.

That shocked Penny, she’d always assumed that all the security services were on the same side as the police. There were calls made, though none by Hugh, who simply waited for the police to leave. Eventually they did, collecting up their equipment and heading for the stairs. There was a brief standoff, one police officer had grabbed George’s laptop and wasn’t giving it up without a fight.

“She acknowledged the warrant.”

He was pointing at her, so Penny opened a file and pretended to do some work.

“No she didn’t.” Said Hugh.

He recovered the laptop and put it back on George’s desk, later on she’d plug it back in and make sure it was undamaged. The police tried to save face by a lot of skidding about as they left, a few even using their sirens.

“Thank you Hugh,” said Penny, “George needs something to be left of his company when he returns.”

The office was quiet now. Penny knew she’d have to tour the other floors, quietening rumours. Especially accounts, they’d had the vapours for days after a bird had flown into one of their windows.

“At least two of us will be here round the clock until George returns.” Said Hugh.

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The small part of Karakum, the sanctuary, was larger than Ruby had first thought, it seemed to enclose at least three square miles. It was as though the people of the Black Sand had chosen what part of their city to save out of aesthetics, rather than usefulness. Several parks and gardens had been saved and at least four open air theatres, but the children complained about a lack of basic housing.

“We all live in two houses over there.” Said Charlotte, pointing.

Charlotte was from Britain and had been born in Derby in Nineteen Twenty. She was Eugenie’s best friend and had latched onto Ruby like a magnet. Ruby had still only met about five of the children,

but she knew them all from Kallina's memories. The only problem was relating memories of young children to the crowd of young adults who were following her toward the Tower of Inisuss.

"Inisuss was a famous artist, who built a perfectly lit studio at the top of his home." Charlotte had informed her.

They walked past another two of the elders and despite appearing to be friendly, Ruby picked up indifference from their minds. She didn't delve deeply, it not only seemed bad manners, she was also unsure how they might react if they felt her doing it.

"Imagine the panic if they tried to go shopping in ASDA." Said Sarah.

Charlotte laughed, seemingly unconcerned if the elder people of the Black Sand had heard the comment. Lau was the most serious one of the children she had met, if a nineteen year old boy could be called a child. Ruby knew he'd have been scandalised at any insult to the Das Geheimnis. Luckily Lau was some distance away, hand in hand with a girl who seemed more than just a friend. "We're all partials." Lau had told her. "Our DNA was changed, added to in some way. You're different to us, but I'm not sure how. Kurt will know."

"So we're still mostly human?" She'd asked.

Lau had looked awkward, as though he'd already stepped over a line of some kind.

"Kurt will answer all questions."

Kurt again, the famous Kurt who seemed to be the font of all knowledge. Ruby could see why the Das Geheimnis couldn't easily co-exist with humans. Sarah was right, the creatures she saw in the sanctuary could never do anything as ordinary as shop for food. In a world where having a different colour skin could mean being attacked, the totally alien look of the people of the Black Sand would never be tolerated. So they'd decided to move a core part of themselves into people, it all made sense to her, even if it did appal her. Then there was Lau and his girlfriend to consider !

"Have any of you had children of your own?" She asked Charlotte.

She looked confused, her face close to tears.

"No," said Eugenie, "that is strictly interdit."

Eugenie had switched back to her native French to say forbidden, Ruby decided to delve into her mind. After all, she was going to be their new leader, or so she'd been told by Kallina. Eugenie felt Ruby in her mind and tried to think of nonsense, songs, rare days outside in the desert. Ruby almost gave up and then the memory was there in front of her, the reason why it was so interdit. Eugenie was now in tears, with Charlotte crying in sympathy. They might look like young adults, but now Ruby knew that they were still children in many ways.

"I'm so sorry, I will never invade your mind again." Said Ruby.

"They didn't know what they were doing. It just happened....."

Eugenie hit Charlotte hard across the face and then turned to Ruby, her face covered in tears.

"Kurt will answer all questions."

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They were almost at the tower when they saw the figure in military uniform, sat leaning against the doorframe.

"He's a bit over relaxed for a guard." Said Serge.

"That's no guard, that's George." Said Ruby.

"Your father?" Asked Charlotte.

"No, my boss."

Ruby ran to meet George, hearing Sarah explaining the concept of a boss to several of the children. They'd yet to meet the masses of humanity, or visit a large city, but Ruby knew they'd soon be

experts on the mechanic of the Job Centre. Ruby made a mental note to keep Sarah well away from the children in future.

“George, what the hell are you doing here and why are you dressed like Action Man ?”

They hugged for a long time, for Ruby it was almost like being back in London again.

“Kurt offered me a change of clothes, but the uniform is comfortable. It should be of course, it cost enough.” Said George.

Ruby kissed him on the lips once and then about three times on the forehead, enjoying his obvious embarrassment.

“But why George ? Why are you here ?”

“I came to rescue you, or try to, it seems you rescued me.”

“You came to help me George, that’s what’s important. But you couldn’t have come alone ?”

“I hired some men in London, all ex-military. They’re at the settlement of Oboy, if Max hasn’t killed them all.”

Max, so he hadn’t died when patrol boat was blown apart.

“Max has been trying to kill me since Varna. I’ll ask Kurt if he can do anything to find your mercenaries.”

“I’m just so pleased to see you Ruby. First the police in Georgia find Carlos dead and then there’s a body found in Romania.”

George was upset and talking too fast and looking into his mind didn’t really make anything clearer.

A body in Romania ? There wasn’t time to go over weeks of their experiences.

“Later George,” she said, “I really need to see Kurt.”

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Max had changed direction a few times, hoping to throw off any pursuit. As he came to the top of a dune and looked back, he saw only his own footprints going off into the distance. They’d obviously decided he wasn’t worth chasing after. His arm was as ruined as his leg now, his right arm to make matters worse. The elbow joint was broken, swelling, the skin going blue and purple in places. If it became infected, it was unlikely that he’d survive long enough to get it treated.

“Bastards.” He muttered.

He’d seen the last of the Iranian pirates die, ripped apart by a grenade. Once they’d lost men, the enemy had turned nasty, began popping off grenades at anything and everything. They’d virtually flattened the settlement, giving his men nowhere to hide. Who were they ? These soldiers who fought like demons and wiped out his people so easily. Max accepted that he was unlikely to ever know, or know where fucking George had run off to. Once the odds became three of them to one of him, Max had crept away. He looked at the sun and then his watch, getting a fairly good idea of where was due west. A bit left of that and he’d come to the ferry with all its supplies.

“Shit !!” He shouted.

He hadn’t seen her arrive, but he knew Baba Yaga from the DGSE files, she was even carrying a damn cat in her arms. Hovering a few feet off the ground, she reminded him of all the nastiest fairy tales he’d read as a child.

“Hello Max.” She said.

He didn’t reply. Max had the AR16 in his left hand and he raised it and fired. The burst didn’t last long, the weapon was almost out of ammunition. A good four or five bullets left the barrel though and at close range he couldn’t miss. The bullets had no effect, all of them aimed at her face, she didn’t even change her expression. It was as though they passed right through her. Max dropped the rifle and went for his knife.



“Enough of this.” Said Baba Yaga.

Max was suddenly upside down and looking at the ground four feet or so below him. It felt like his ankle was held in an invisible vice. She swung him about like a rag doll, like a child involved in a strange kind of science project.

“What are you going to do to me ?” Asked Max.

“I’ll start with a little punishment.” She answered.

She dropped him, timing it so that he landed on his broken arm. For a moment Max could see nothing through the pain and then he began to instinctively crawl away from her. It was no good, the monster was in front of him again, still stroking her cat.

“Max, meet Constanze. I named her after Mozart’s wife. She was a good friend and I still miss her.”

“You’re insane, get away from me.”

He was in the air again, swinging about and then dropping. This time he landed on his good arm, but the jolt winded him.

“Oh my dear Max ! After the punishment I’ll take you home with me. There we’ll discuss your wrong doings and agree on a process of redemption for you.”

This time she didn’t lift him. Max felt pressure on his chest and he was hurtled over the sands, landing like a rag doll. He coughed uncontrollably, noticing spots of blood colouring the sand where he coughed. Baba Yaga was next to him, looking down at him, her expression still looking benign.

“You’re killing me !”

“Oh no Max, I won’t let you die. It may take years, but you will repent and you will be redeemed.”

She was actually smiling at him now.

“Your salvation will be my project Max.”

She petted her cat.

“Isn’t that right Constanze ? We have all the time in the world to teach him the error of his ways.”

Behind them the desert seemed to explode, the sky filling with flames. It looked to be some distance away and Baba Yaga didn’t even look in that direction. Max thought he might be imagining it, but then there were more explosion. He used his good arm to cover his eyes as the shock wave covered them both in sand. Max lost any curiosity about the event, as Baba Yaga lifted him by his ankle again.

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Whoever Inisuss had been, they had obviously appreciated beauty. The tower was floor after floor of perfectly proportioned rooms, all lit to perfection by the mid-morning sun. Ruby had wanted to meet Kurt on her own, but everyone was climbing the tower with her. Of course Kurt had to be on the top floor, it seemed right for him to be at the very top. No stairs, long and gentle ramps spiralled up the inside walls, offering superb views of the rooms below. A rather tired and scruffy group of over twenty people arrived on the top floor, to find Kurt stood at the far end of the room, staring out over the desert. He turned as he heard them approach.

“Welcome Ruby. Welcome to what remains of Karakum.”

It was pure theatre and Ruby didn’t begrudge him staging it. She approached, but didn’t feel the need to hug him. For a while Kurt had been her crush figure, the potential love of her life.

Somewhere on the journey that had changed and now he was just someone with a lot of information she needed. Besides, the whole Serge thing was still going on and she had no idea where that might lead.

“There is so much I need to know.” She said.

“And I will tell you everything, even give you some of my memories and skills. I know you and your friends probably want to rest, but I thought it was important to meet you today.”

"If they're sleeping here tonight, we'll need to double up."

It was Sophie, practical and down to earth Sophie. Born in Moscow around eighteen eighty seven and one of Kallina's favourites. Kurt held up his hand for silence and the room went quiet.

"I think Ruby has a few questions she wants answered."

"I do. We'll start with.... am I human ?"

"We're all partials."

The children had said it as one, obviously it was a mantra they often repeated. Kurt quietened them and sent them back a few paces, giving Ruby a little privacy.

"I don't think they'd go away, even if I ordered them to," he said, "they're far too excited by your arrival."

"Their new leader, some kind of saviour. Is that how they see me ?"

"Well, yes. It is your destiny Ruby, you can't escape it."

"So answer my question. Am I human ?"

He reached for her hand, holding it, resisting her efforts to remove it from his grasp.

"Nothing human was removed from your DNA Ruby, you would never have been born if they hadn't altered you. Ruby Anne Mason was destined to be stillborn, as were most of the altered children."

She felt Serge walk up behind her, keeping close but not disturbing her. She pulled her hand out of Kurt's and reached for Serge, holding his hand.

"How many children did they alter ?" She asked.

"They tried various ways Ruby, Kallina and I are the only survivors from the first trial. I have loved Kallina for many years, but even I have to admit she isn't stable. I am the only success out of over a thousand altered children."

"A thousand babies !?" Said Ruby.

"They were all going to die Ruby. Infant mortality then was over fifty percent, in Kallina's tribe it was seventy percent."

He leant a little closer to her and lowered his voice.

"A few far worse than Kallina did survive. I hope you never meet any of them, it was one of them that the French used to kill seven of the children. It cost them a village though, no one will live there now."

Ruby turned and hugged Serge, looking at the young adults and seeing not biologically altered beings, but smiling faces who were relying on her. She faced Kurt once again.

"Tell me it all, what happened to the next trial group ?"

Kurt never had a chance to answer, the sky to the south seemed to fill with fire, followed by the deep boom of a massive explosion. Another blast followed, some distance away, but the cloud of dust and debris was beginning to darken the room.

"What the fuck was that ?" Asked Spider.

Another two explosions followed, the last one so powerful that it rocked the tower, vibrating the floor beneath their feet. A large dark cloud could be seen reaching from horizon to horizon, reaching right up to the clouds.

"What does it mean ?" Asked Sarah.

"It means we're all dead, if we want to be. Someone has destroyed Oboy and they'll assume we died in the explosions." Answered Serge.

"I wouldn't mind a new identity and a new start." Said Leo.

Someone had found George a chair and he was smiling at Ruby.

"Not me," he said, "I quite like being rich, I'll be returning to London."

Sarah was looking stunned, as though thinking over the possibilities of taking on a new identity.

"The Americans," said Olga, "they did this. They do have some very effective toys."

George stood up, stretching his legs.

"You're probably right, I was warned about the Americans and their missiles." He said. "I also have a few friends who were in Oboy, if any of them survived."

Kurt beckoned Eugenie over and whispered a few words to her, before she ran from the room.

"I've sent message to the elders, they will go and see what can be done. If any of your friends are alive, they will find them."

"No more fucking Work Programme." Sarah suddenly shouted.

Everyone laughed and Sarah blushed, holding onto Spider and hiding her face against his shirt. Kurt joined in with the laughter and it seemed he thought the meeting was over;

"We'll carry on with this tomorrow, whose turn is it to prepare lunch?" He asked.

"No!" Said Ruby. "Let's get this over and done with."

"I don't rememb....."

"The second trial Kurt?"

He looked at the young adults, all waiting for him to speak.

"Perhaps we should let the children go to lunch?" Suggested Kurt.

Sophie was having none of it. She had an idea and her eyes almost glowed with excitement.

"No, please.....Let us stay, I have an idea about where Ruby could take us."

"It is their future we're discussing," said Ruby, "let them stay."

"Very well, the second trial changed different parts of the subjects DNA and it worked far better, though still only a fraction became.....viable."

Ruby didn't want to know any more percentages on child mortality and how many disasters there had been, so she let Kurt carry on.

"There were twenty one children, all perfect. They were to be the legacy, the way the people of the Black Sand pass on their knowledge and their gifts. They're dying you see, none of them have given birth to a child in hundreds of years. They've extended their lives to see the children sent on their way and then..... quite soon you will return here and find no one here."

Ruby looked about, quickly counting faces, though she already knew the number.

"Is thirteen of them enough?" She asked.

"Barely, but we stopped trying to wake up other partials. As you are aware, the consequences could often be almost apocalyptic."

Eugenie was back, whispering to Kurt, smiling at Ruby and joining the other children.

"It appears two of George's team were found alive and are being brought here." Said Kurt.

"What are their names?" Asked George.

"I don't know, they'll be here later today."

There had been no refreshments and only George was seated, yet every face in front of her seemed ready to continue. Even Sarah was smiling and attentive.

"So, why are they hundreds of years old and still children?" She asked.

"It was easy for the elders to keep them asleep for most of the year, often several years in a row, kept away from the normal ravages of time. They've always been awake together and we haven't stinted on their education."

"I speak forty languages." Said Lau.

"Only because you plan to rule the world." Someone joked.

There was general laughter, but Kurt leant a little closer to Ruby.

“Seriously, you will have to keep an eye on Lau, a close eye.”

Kurt stepped back and clapped his hands to end the laughter.

“The idea was to keep them as children until the third trial produced a new leader, you Ruby. There was also another perceived advantage to keeping them as children.”

“Sexual maturity ?” Gussed Ruby.

Eugenie hid behind the others and Ruby would have liked to have spared her the next few seconds, but that was impossible.

“Yes, we misjudged things badly and a pregnancy had to be terminated. Only the one and now all the girls are on pregnancy inhibiting drugs. Only natural of course, they’re young and healthy and always in each other’s company.”

Ruby now understood, Kurt was just as naïve about how to look after the children as she was. He might have hundreds of years of knowledge and gifts she could only guess at, but he hadn’t a clue about raising children. The problem was, neither did she.

“They must never interbreed,” said Kurt, “the outcome could be very bad, very bad indeed. They must find their partners among the humans, spread their altered DNA. The gifts will be diluted, but part of the people of the Black Sand will carry on forever.”

“You will be here to help, won’t you Kurt ?”

“I’ll be around and visit occasionally. You’re more likely to see Kallina and you can trust her around the children, they’re incredibly precious to her.”

Ruby looked at all the faces and knew that Kurt was going to vanish, perhaps forever. All she’d have was Baba Yaga, to help her raise thirteen young adults.

“I’m not sure I’m up to this,” she said, “I expected children, small children. Many of you aren’t much younger than me. Where am I to take you ? What would I do with you ?”

“We promise to be good.” Shouted a girl at the back.

Even the serious Lau was grinning at her.

“Do what you want with us,” he said, “take us where you like. We’ll all help you and Kurt has taught us how important you are to us.”

“Pppppllllllease !” Pleaded Sophie.

“I don’t think you have any option,” added George, “and I will help you if I can.”

“We all will.” Said Sarah.

“Fine, just don’t expect me to be right all the time. Now maybe it is time you went and started lunch.”

“Yes Miss Ruby.” Said Charlotte.

They filed out of the door, Ruby and her friends behind them.

“Don’t worry Ruby,” said Kurt, “tomorrow I’ll share some of my memories and gifts with you. Getting a few children to London will be easy for you.”

“Can we fly this time ?” Asked Sarah. “I’m fed up with cars and boats, especially boats.”

“I didn’t say we’d go to London.”

“It makes sense, at least for now.” Said George.

Sophie returned and gripped Ruby’s hand. Holding it tight, as if stopping her going anywhere.

“You will stay won’t you ?”

“I will.”

“Promise !”

Ruby kissed the top of the girls head. George was right, she did have no option and anyway, it might actually be fun.

“I promise and while we eat, you can tell me where you think we might go.”

Ruby looked hard at George, there was still much in his mind that needed explanation.

“And you George, you can tell me more about this body in Romania.”

~ The End ~

*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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