

Ruby V : Machu Picchu

Chapter 5 – What Happens Next

“Years ago someone had developed an encryption system called Pretty Good Privacy, or simply PGP. A truly antique system, but like the great white shark, it didn’t need to evolve. PGP was still the basis for securing documents in a huge number of well-known applications.”

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Ruby had noticed that breakfast had become a hybrid mixture of eating, a roll call, with a briefing over coffee. The roll call was easy with so few of them, though she was still pleased when she could see that everyone was present. Sophie was no longer a red head, with her new glossy black look, though everyone was getting used to it. Spider and Lily were still bruised and slightly battered, but once again, everyone would get used to it. As she stood up to talk, Ruby felt like the desk sergeant in a police station, who’d seen it all and done it all. The problem with experiencing so much, so young, was that she often felt separated from real life, as though everything was surreal.

“Alright, I’m sure we’re all enjoying the breakfast Spider cooked.” She said.

“Yes, food that sticks to your ribs.” Said Caleb

“It needed beans, baked beans.” Said Spider. “If anyone sees a few tins in a shop, grab them.”

A bell, there really needed to be a bell, so she could move onto the next item. Ruby picked up a water glass and tapped the edge with a fork.

“Moving on, you will have all heard about the documents Sarah has been busy scanning. I want no secrets between us, but please don’t mention them to any friends and loved ones.”

“It all looks fake to me.” Said Lily.

“And she should know.” Added Spider.

They were dividing into two camps, the believers in the documents and those who thought it was all fake news. Ruby had decided to put it to a quick vote, before deciding on a direction of travel. She was already wondering about sending everything to Foxy and forgetting all about terrorists in Lima. That might cause problems with Caleb though and he was currently getting very close to Sophie.

“I intend to ask you to vote.” Said Ruby. “A simple show of hands, it’s not the kind of vote that needs to be kept secret. If the majority vote fake, I’ll send everything to British intelligence and let them follow it up. If the majority is for genuine, I’ll begin looking into the history of the building where the documents were found and this Operation Forty Love.”

Caleb was muttering at Todd, who hadn’t known she was going to ask for a vote. There was muttering and Sophie was glaring at her. Good, she wanted them to own the outcome of the vote, whichever way it went.

“Can we have a little time to discuss this ?” Asked Sophie.

“No bullying anyone, Sophie.” Said Ruby. “I have the main item on our unwritten agenda. We can have the vote after we talk about Huancayo. Serge, or whoever may be impersonating him, has asked for a meeting at a certain place in Huancayo.”

They settled down, though Sophie was whispering to Lily. It was going to be a vote for the documents being genuine, Ruby was certain of it.

“There is the famous high Andes train from Lima to Huancayo, which I know a lot of you wanted to travel on. I have no idea how long we’ll be in Huancayo, it could be a few days, to a couple of weeks.

Lily is going to book our hotel accommodation. So, if you have requirements for who you want to share with....Let her know.”

That caused some laughter, though Sophie was actually blushing.

“What is Huancayo like ?” Asked Spider.

“There are lots of tourist brochures on a table near the front door.” Said Ruby.

Ruby drank her coffee and watched Sophie go from person to person, whispering to them. Lobbying to get the vote result that suited Caleb, which was a vote for genuine.

“When are we leaving for our rail journey ?” Asked Sarah.

“I’m booking tickets for tomorrow morning.” Said Lily.

The moment had arrived; Sophie had muttered at and pestered everyone. Not that Ruby cared either way, it was them owning the result that mattered.

“Back to the vote.” Said Ruby. “Raise your hand if you think the documents are fakes.”

Just Spider, waving his hand about. There was no real need to have the other vote, but there was a very tiny chance the remainder might abstain.

“Now.....Raise your hand if you think they’re genuine.”

Ruby only raised her own hand, after everyone else had voted. If it hadn’t been for Spider, the vote would have been unanimous. Sophie looked happy, which was good. Ruby had already decided to give her most of the work involved in researching the names Caleb had given them.

“Thank you.” Said Ruby. “We’ll talk about the next step with the documents, during our fourteen hour train journey to Huancayo.”

“How long ?” Asked Spider.

“Fourteen hours, longer if there are problems.” Said Ruby.

“It’ll be fun, Spider.” Said Sarah. “Come on, where’s your sense of adventure ?”

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Thiago hadn’t joined in with any of the chatter over breakfast, though he had voted with just about everyone else, that the documents were genuine. The high Andes train journey was still a day away, yet Thio was sat alone near the door, reading tourist brochures. Sophie felt sorry for him, though she had promised Caleb a day at the museum, just the two of them.

“We can’t leave him sat there.” She muttered at Caleb.

“He’ll be fine....Someone will invite him somewhere.”

Only they might not and Caleb would be left behind, reading leaflets written in English for overseas tourists. It wasn’t that Ruby’s friends were thoughtless.....Actually it was because they were thoughtless. It wasn’t being cruel, it was because there was so much going on and Thio was still very much an unknown.

“Yes, we’re going to invite him to join us.” Said Sophie.

“But.....We were so busy yesterday.” Said Caleb. “We deserve a little time to ourselves.”

Sophie wasn’t good at flirtation; it had never been on Kallina’s study curriculum. Everything Sophie knew, she’d picked up from watching TV shows and movies. She prodded Caleb in the chest and wiggled her finger about through a gap in his shirt. Eye contact too, plenty of eye contact.

“We can be back here by three.....Then we can have a couple of hours to ourselves.”

“Fine.....It’s not that I don’t like him or anything.” Said Caleb.

Of course, Thio might have said no to joining them, but he didn’t.

“I’ve always wanted to visit the museum in Lima.” Said Thio. “I’ve just never had the chance before.”

Lily not only drove their bus, she seemed to think of it as her private property. Yes, she had a lot to arrange, but Sophie didn’t see why she needed a minibus to book train tickets. It meant them taking

a taxi, which was fine, but expensive. The National Museum of archaeology and history didn't look that impressive from the outside, but it was built to be secure rather than decorative. As they got out of the taxi, Sophie felt excited, though museums always made her feel like that. On a good day, a visit to the British Museum in London, could make her feel light headed. So close to all that knowledge and history....It was intoxicating.

"I've always wanted to come here.....Since I was a child." Said Thio.

"We have to see the Machu Picchu exhibits first." Said Caleb.

"Yes, it is Ruby's main reason for being here, in a way." Said Sophie.

"Why?" Asked Thio.

"She's going to scatter the ashes of a friend, at the highest point." Said Sophie.

"I don't think you're allowed to do that." Said Thio.

"We get told that a lot." Said Caleb.

There were quite a few visitors in the museum, though not enough to make it feel overcrowded. The main Machu Picchu exhibit was called Machu Picchu and the treasures of ancient Peru. Designed to catch the attention of tourists, it was colourful and had plenty of interesting artefacts. Sophie's attention was caught by a tiny golden statue of a Llama.

"Amazing, such craftsmanship from all those thousands of years ago." Said Sophie.

Caleb was gazing at some pictures of the Nazca Lines, the huge drawings on a desert plateau in Southern Peru. Sophie had seen pictures before and thought the ancient peoples of that region, were trying to attract the attention of their gods. She knew the Nazca had copied a far older idea, but that was part of her history and that of the original Das Geheimnis.

"I forgot the Nazca Lines are in Peru." Said Caleb. "To think....People thought the lines were roads, until the first time someone saw them from an aircraft."

"I've always wanted to visit the Nazca Desert and see them." Said Sophie. "They have a special meaning to my people."

"Who are your people?" Asked Thio.

Too much far too soon, Sophie cursed her own stupidity. No secrets from Caleb, or at least very few secrets. Thio was still very much with them on a trial basis. Ruby still might wipe his mind and leave him outside the restaurant where Sarah had found him.

"One day, Thio....When I know you better." She said.

"We're in Peru for a while." Said Caleb. "I'm sure you can persuade Ruby to make the Nazca desert one of our holiday trips."

"I'm not sure if that was a compliment." Said Sophie.

Thio was a typical tourist in many ways, hooked on the golden items. Ever glint of precious metal had to be looked at. Sophie could understand, there were a lot of exquisite pieces of art made out of pure gold. If you wanted a soft medium that was easy to work, yet guaranteed to last forever, it had to be gold. Caleb was still obsessed with the Nazca Lines, even buying a book on them in the inevitable museum gift shop. Kallina had understood where the Nazca had learned to draw pictures on such a huge scale. Kurt had known too, though now both of them were dead. So much ancient knowledge was only known to the few surviving wunderkinds and they didn't know everything. Sophie bought a book on Machu Picchu, mainly for all the wonderful pictures.

"Where do we go next?" Asked Thio, as they left the museum.

"Lunch.....I'm starving." Said Sophie.

"There's a traditional Peruvian restaurant just over the road." Said Caleb. "Lily has been there and thought it was really good."

The restaurant was bright and clean, with friendly staff. It was an ideal time to look at their purchases from the museum gift shop and talk about what they'd seen. For Sophie, museums were all about soaking herself in local history and taking it in by osmosis. The trip had definitely been worthwhile. She picked up the book Caleb had bought on the Nazca Lines.

"You can borrow it whenever you like." Said Caleb.

"Can you imagine the reaction of the first aviator who saw the lines from above?" She asked.

"They are amazing." Said Thio.

Looking for hostile intent around them was automatic for Sophie, as was any mind thinking about their names. A middle aged woman at a seat near the window, was thinking about Caleb. A man walking a dog along Plaza Bolívar was looking at the restaurant while wondering about Sophie. A little deep probing of the woman showed her to be from the National Directorate of Intelligence, commonly known as DINI. It seemed that she and the man, were part of a protection team. Someone in London had arranged for them to be cherished by the local equivalent on MI6. Plus Spider and Lily had become quite friendly with two DINI agents. It was good and bad, or so Sophie believed. Nice to have someone watching their backs, but their DINI watchdogs were certain to bring attention to Ruby and her group of tourists.

"Woman by the window, long skirt and glasses.....Don't stare at her, Thio." Said Sophie.

"What about her?" Asked Caleb.

"Here to look after us, and an agent of DINI. There's another outside, a guy with a dog."

"That's good.....Isn't it?" Asked Thio.

"Depends.....Great if anyone tries to rob us." Said Sophie. "On the downside, to everyone in the intelligence community, we'll stick out like a sore thumb."

"As though we're floodlit." Added Caleb.

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Sending confidential messages had become almost an art form. Monique could understand why Foxy tended to use members of the intelligence service who were given powerful motorcycles. It was personal; they could see the recipient and verify their identity against an image database. No one time code pads, no encryption to worry about. As for simple cyphers....Most families had a home computer that could crack those by a brute force attack. An envelope was delivered to whoever was authorised to receive it. An envelope containing a message written in plain English, or whatever language the recipient was fluent in. Sadly, Monique didn't have access to the resources Foxy could call on.

"Todd has a laptop and we agreed an encryption phrase, just for emergencies." She said.

"Was it long and complex enough?" Asked Nazili.

"Yes, I'm not a fool." Said Monique.

Years ago someone had developed an encryption system called Pretty Good Privacy, or simply PGP. A truly antique system, but like the great white shark, it didn't need to evolve. PGP was still the basis for securing documents in a huge number of well-known applications. Use a long and complex password phrase and it was still just about unbreakable.

"Sorry." Said Nazili. "I'm still amazed that the CIA hired Chris Bull. Aren't they supposed to be on our side, the side of the Brits I mean?"

"Oh dear, you've seen too many late night movies. The CIA are only allowed to work overseas, but to an ambitious agent, just about everywhere is overseas. Plus, we don't know what Cal might have been up to. She did kill two men in Baku."

"Yes, but they were going to sell her, as though she was a piece of meat." Said Nazili.

"I'm just saying she is hardly the sweet innocent she often seems. Besides, Chris Bull was hired to watch her and report back, nothing more. We still have no idea what the CIA intends....Hence my encrypted message to Ruby."

Even in Peru, Ruby still had ten times the contacts Monique could call on. Then there were Todd's people in the military. All intelligence departments leaked and the CIA wasn't immune. Someone in Ruby's chain of contacts, would know what they were up to.

"Ruby might use Villand, but that is up to her." Said Monique.

It was all there, a summary of everything Chris Bull had told them and what Monique had found by digging into her mind. Enough to worry Ruby, but there was no way of avoiding that. She waited while Nazili read it all over her shoulder, for about the tenth time. It was annoying, but she did value his opinion.

"Alright?" She asked.

"Yes, send it."

Todd had given her the software, which encrypted the document and then put it inside an encrypted Zip file, which used another different password. Belt and braces, Monique liked that. She attached the Zip file to a mundane 'hope you're all well' message and pressed send.

"I hope we haven't just started a war." She muttered.

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Spider had told her he'd been a biker once, when he was younger. He'd boasted about the various motorcycles he'd owned and for the most part, she believed him. Like most of the men she'd known, Spider exaggerated for effect. But if he said he'd once been a fairly hard core biker, she believed him. Sarah was surprised when he arrived a little after breakfast, on a noisy Yamaha. She was no expert, but it looked like the kind of bike the local teenagers were hurtling around on. He handed her a colourful crash helmet.

"There's a beach not far away, only a couple of kilometres." He'd said. "Playa de La Chira, one of the guys who looks after the garden, told me about it. Get your swimsuit and bring a towel."

Sarah had been there and bought the T shirt, when it came to changing into swimwear on the beach. Trying to hide behind a towel on a windy day, with horny guys trying to get a look....No, she'd put her bikini on under her clothes. There had been one important question to ask before she got on the back of the bike.

"Is this thing legal?" She'd asked, pointing at the bike.

"Of course....I've had a full bike license since I was seventeen."

It wasn't what she'd meant and he knew it. Sarah didn't ask if they were insured, just in case he said no. She'd made sure they had decent travel insurance, including medical cover. If they fell off, they fell off; she was beginning to really like the idea of turning up at the beach on a noisy bike.

"Come on it'll be fun."

Spider had said, while giving her his best lopsided grin.

"Alright....Just don't drive like a lunatic and get us arrested."

He'd said it wasn't far and most of it along one straight road. There was some new construction going on, parts of Lima were expanding to satisfy the need for more housing. They missed the signpost at the turnoff, twice. But, they reached the beach quite quickly and there was a place to leave the bike. Sarah looked the beach over and it met with her approval. Spider locked the bike, while she went through her strange beach checklist.

"A bit rocky and the sand isn't quite the right shade of orangey red." She said. "But....I like it and I can see people swimming, so the water is likely to be clean."

"The staff at the house come here." Said Spider.

"Locals always know the best places....Alright, let's get wet." Sarah said.

She splashed about for a while and the water was pleasantly warm. Really though, Sarah like to lie on her towel and sunbathe for a couple of hours. No sunblock of course, or any way to shade herself from the sun. That was part of the fun of being spontaneous though, and she'd live with a few red patches of scorched skin. Spider swam about for a while, before coming to join her.

"To make things perfect, there should be a guy in a caravan, selling cans of drinks." She said.

"I think I can take care of that."

He went off in the direction of the bike and returned with a small duffle bag. It must have been borrowed with the noisy Yamaha; she'd never seen it before. Spider took two tins of coke out of the bag and handed one to her.

"Be a bit warm, careful how you open it." He said.

"Any other surprises in the bag?" She asked.

"Maybe."

Luck was smiling on her; the tin didn't empty itself over the sand when she opened it. Warm coke wasn't one of her favourite tastes, but at that moment, she'd have happily drunk just about anything.

"We're alright aren't we?" Asked Spider. "Breaking up over almost nothing.....That seems to be in the past. Do you think we're past all that?"

"I've changed and I know you have." Said Sarah. "A good looking guy chatted me up in the Thai takeaway. Gorgeous he was, a real young Omar Sharif. I wasn't even tempted to go out with him."

"Not even tempted a little bit?" Spider asked.

"Well.... Maybe a tiny bit."

They grinned at one another and sipped at their warm coke.

"Why are you asking about us?" She asked. "We're doing alright.....That's always been enough."

"It's just that you mentioned having a child." Said Spider. "It started me wondering and.....I began to think it might not be a terrible idea."

It had been a joke, but she'd been wondering about it too. Spider was forty now and she seemed to be hurtling through her thirties like a runaway train. If they were going to bring a new life into the world, they didn't have forever to do it.

"You're serious, aren't you?" She asked.

"Yes, I am."

He was giving her the smile that had terrified harmless old ladies. It wasn't really strange, she'd read quite a lot on the psychology of relationships. There had been a hope it might help with her various therapies. It hadn't, but she had remembered that for women, a man who doesn't run off was important. Being there was important and Spider had been there for quite some time now. Through thick and thin as they say, he'd been there.

"Fine, we'll try when we get back to London." She said. "Just one thing though."

"What's that?"

"I hope it looks more like me than you."

That caused a play fight, with her ending up looking into his eyes from close up. Spider was a bit of a pug, there was no use in denying it. There was also his criminal lifestyle, which they'd need to discuss. No visiting dad in jail for her child, she'd seen too many other kids go through that. On the whole though and ignoring a few obvious flaws.....He'd make a good dad, she was sure of it.

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Lily was surprised at how much she enjoyed driving the yellow bus, with its stick shift and worn gearbox. You had to take the gear changes slowly and sometimes double de clutch. As a London girl who'd taken her test in a small automatic hatchback, the bus wasn't an easy drive. There was something about it though and the way other road users kept out of her way.

"It's like having my own mini tank." Said Lily. "No one tangles with the bus."

"Our bus is only on hire, but I might buy it." Said Ruby. "Have it shipped to London...Can you imagine this beast going through Hackney."

"No, not really."

Just the two of them, they'd just bought the train tickets to Huancayo. There had been a problem getting enough seats for everyone, so Ruby had visited the ticket office with a bag full of cash. Lily had been amazed at how quickly a few extra seats had materialised. In her old job, British intelligence procured goods and services, by a long and frustrating process. Forms were the name of the game, often dozens of them. One senior guy transferred in from the Foreign Office, had complained about filling in four forms, just to get a stapler for his desk. Bribery was scandalous of course, but it did save so much time.

"So, where to next?" Asked Lily.

"Going for a burger is tempting, but I can't keep visiting cafés to fill the time. I'll end up as big as a house." Said Ruby. "Is there anywhere else you think we need to visit?"

There had been a visit to a camping store, where a nice young man had helped them carry some clothing and equipment out to the bus. Ruby had a list of anything and everything that might be useful on their trip to Huancayo. The city was at a height of about ten thousand feet, with a climate very different to Lima. While people in Lima were enjoying twenty three degrees, it was twelve degrees in Huancayo, less with the wind chill. The clothing had been for cold weather hiking.

"Do you have tattoos?" Asked Lily.

"No, my mum would have killed me." Said Ruby. "I nearly got one with Serge, but he decided identifying marks weren't a good idea in his line of work."

"You've seen my ink, I know you have." Said Lily.

"Yes, a full bestiary of dragons and mystical beasts.....Where is this conversation heading?"

Foxy had deliberately ignored her tattoos, though he'd fought her corner with HR. Tattoos were fine in British intelligence as long as they were hidden under clothing. Lily had an imp that was just visible near her collar bone and a wyvern that made a summer appearance on her midriff. Even when she was just days away from leaving, the woman who ran HR, was still trying to get her officially reprimanded for those pieces of ink.

"I looked up a tattoo studio online." Said Lily. "I'm not committed to getting any work done, but I want to look through their design books. I was wondering.....Do you fancy a tattoo of your own?"

Ruby was fussing about with the clothing, getting coats and jeans out of bags and wrappers. At first Ruby looked startled, but then she started to smile.

"I have thought of getting a tattoo." Said Ruby. "When Charlie got the rose on her ankle, I was so close to getting one too. I'm not sure now.....But looking at their art book can't hurt."

"Yes, I can see you with a dragon on your shoulder." Said Lily.

"Hey, I'm just going to look.....What are you thinking of?"

"Maybe another wyvern, on my back.....I'm still at the pondering stage."

There was a gap to park in that wasn't too much of a trudge from the tattoo studio. The place looked clean and tidy, which was important. No one wants a dirty needle injecting ink into their skin. A woman of about fifty ran the place and she knew a little English. Lily's Spanish was fairly good and

Ruby's knowledge of the language, kind of dovetailed with hers. There was a lot of good natured laughing by everyone and a few classic misunderstandings. Quite soon though, they had some coffee and several of the artist's sample books.

"Wow, I came to the right place." Said Lily. "There's every mythical creature I've heard of in this book and a few I haven't."

Ruby was looking through a book of signs, emblems and a lot of other things people like to have on their skin forever. A few were emblems of Peruvian political groups from the left and right, Lily knew several from working for Foxy. Most would have been classified simply as pretty designs.

"I know it's cheesy, but Kurt had a version of this on his arm." Said Ruby. "Kallina did too....Though hers was a bit different."

Ruby was pointing at a triquetra, an ancient Celtic three-pointed symbol representing three-way unity. It was cheesy, Lily had seen it used in so many movies and TV shows, usually as something to do with magic or the supernatural.

"Nice and simple, she could probably do that in one sitting." Said Lily. "Are you going to get it? Go on, it'll look so cool on your shoulder, or maybe on your hip."

"Are you getting another wyvern?" Asked Ruby.

"Yes, though I'll need to come back for several sittings. We're in Peru for a while though and her art looks so good. Amazing actually, far better than the place I use in London."

"I want the version Kallina had on her upper arm." Said Ruby. "Do you think she'll do something...Bespoke? Sorry, this is my first time, I'm a tattoo virgin."

"Only one way to find out?" Said Lily.

Nothing was going to be quick, especially as the woman was already working on someone. They obtained paper and a few coloured pencils. Ruby was adamant she wanted every line to be black. Ruby was no artist, but she drew a passable image of a triquetra, with no circle running through it. In the three places between the blades of the triquetra, Ruby drew symbols in a language Lily had never seen before.

"Are those runes?" She asked.

Ruby leant in close and talked in little above a whisper.

"I think these are characters in the language of my people, the original secret people of the Karakum. This one.....I saw that strange H with a hat on it, in the ancient city."

"You go before me Ruby, get it done."

More time to talk to the artist, though one of her assistants could speak Italian, which Lily knew. Not that using three languages speeded things up. If anything explanations took far longer. It seemed Ruby's wishes were understood, she wanted the emblem she'd drawn and she wanted it on her right shoulder, well below any summer collar line. They did find out a name for the tattoo artist during the conversation, she was Gabriela. After pointing at the young man in the chair and a little muttering, it seemed Ruby was next. Or as Gabriela put it.

"Wait.....You next."

The assistant with passable Italian, looked interested in the emblem Ruby had drawn. There was talk about witchcraft, which Lily could understand. A triquetra had been used in more occult movies than she'd had hot dinners. It was Ruby's drawn characters that stopped it being totally cheesy. The assistant started talking quickly, which didn't help. She had their full attention though, with one very clearly pronounced name.

"Baba Yaga."

"What do you know about Baba Yaga?" Asked Ruby.

The three of them talking quickly in several different languages, for a while it was chaos. The assistant looked quite young, she actually squealed when their attention was too much for her. She ran off, returning with her bag. Out of the bag she produced a magazine.

“Here.....Here, Baba Yaga.” She said

It was a local magazine in Spanish, the kind of publication that thrives on celebrity gossip and outrageously fake news. The sort of magazine to run with the second coming one week and the rapture the week after. The woman had opened it on a page that talked about a new archaeological discovery, in the style of a script for an Indiana Jones movie. Lily’s Spanish wasn’t perfect, but the article was written in simple terms, like the magazine equivalent of clickbait.

“There.....Your drawing.” Said the woman.

Going by the map and a huge red arrow, the archaeological site was about halfway to Machu Picchu and quite high up in the mountains. A few nearby villages, but no major towns and definitely no large cities anywhere close. The piece mentioned witchcraft a few times and used the term Peruvian pre-history. It used it the way teenage boys used big words to impress teenage girls.

“I see it now, the picture right at the bottom of the page.” Said Ruby.

It wasn’t the H with a strange hat; the article had a ring around the character at the bottom of the triquetra Ruby had drawn. It was a character that looked like it was made with a stylus in clay, just several dashes with two dots over the top. It was clearly labelled Baba Yaga, but the explanation was in far from everyday market Spanish.

“We need Sarah to read this and translate it into tourist English.” Said Lily.

“Pay the assistant for it; we can’t just steal the magazine.” Said Ruby.

Lily was getting used to haggling and bribing, the magazine was theirs in exchange for a twenty American dollar note. Poor Ruby, she was so anxious to know more about the dig site, but they really did need Sarah and her language skills.

“Does this.....Do you think Baba Yaga might be alive ?” Asked Lily.

“No, she’s gone and will never come back from the dead.” Said Ruby. “We don’t need those kinds of rumours, so be careful what you say back at the house. Kallina always had a thing about Peru. She sometimes visited an ancient temple high in the mountains. This new site might be a better place to scatter her remains, nothing more.”

“Really, you’re not hoping to find out more about Baba Yaga ?” Asked Lily.

“That would be nice, but new digs are usually full of eager students with trowels. We might not be allowed anywhere near anything interesting. First Sarah gets to translate this article. Then and only if it sounds worth it, we can all go to.....It doesn’t give a name. We can go this clearing in the mountains in our yellow bus. If there’s a road we can get there. After we get back from Huancayo.”

“I want to get the same tattoo as you.” Said Lily.

“Why ?”

“I have no idea, it just feels important. I can get the wyvern started another day.”

Gabriella looked at the drawing again, nodded and made sure Ruby was comfortable in the big chair, the place where all the wonderful artwork became ink on skin. Lily knew there was discomfort in having a tattoo, she’d even admit to pain when block colours were added. Ruby didn’t flinch, as the triquetra was drawn on her shoulder.

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Todd wasn’t their dad after all. It was just that everyone seemed to be doing their own thing for dinner and he didn’t want anyone going to bed hungry, especially him. Thanks mainly to Sophie and her inability to walk past a supermarket, the huge old fridge in the kitchen was full of things to graze

on. He'd wanted something more substantial though and all the places that delivered, had minimum amounts they'd deliver. Luckily and despite admitting to have already eaten, Sarah and Spider had said they could eat something with fries.

"Just about anything with fries." Sarah had said.

Todd had ordered the old reliable perennial of battered chicken and fries. Lots of it, enough to feed anyone who might arrive back at the house late and hungry. He'd been eating a mouthful of fries when he'd decided to log onto the webmail service he'd set up for anything to do with Ruby and the wunderkinds. There was a six hour time delay with London; the message from Monique hadn't been sat in the inbox that long. The CIA watching Ruby's apartment in London, combined with Ruby investigating Project Forty Love in Peru. Todd did occasionally believe in coincidences, but not ones that huge.

"Hey, don't eat everything." Said Todd. "Ruby might be starving when she gets back."

Sarah was worse than Spider, eating as though she'd been starved for days. Todd was so tempted to yell an obscenity and tell them about the email from London. His army discipline kicked in. Ruby was effectively their commander and she had to see everything, before anyone else was told.

"It's her, she's a bloody gannet." Said Spider.

"Hey, you're not too big to thump." Said Sarah.

Todd was in the middle of reading a transcript of Chris Bull's interrogation, when Ruby and Lily arrived. Both of them went straight for the fries.

"There's more in the fridge, we ordered tons." Said Spider.

"Tins of coke too." Added Sarah.

Lily was pulling a dressing on her arm to one side, to show Sarah a new tattoo. Ruby was trying to show Sarah a magazine article, amidst all the squealing and appreciative noises.

"I give up, read it when you get a chance, Sarah." Said Ruby. "It is important; it could be where we're going after Huancayo."

"We just received an email from Monique and Nazili." Said Todd.

No good, Ruby was unbuttoning her blouse and not really listening to him. There was a piece of gauze taped to her shoulder, just below her collar bone.

"I know we said that if we did get tattoos, we'd do it together." Said Ruby. "It was a spur of the moment thing."

She came closer until she was almost sat on his lap. Ruby carefully pulled down the gauze, to reveal a new and slightly scabby looking tattoo.

"Wow, that is different." Said Todd. "Do the symbols mean anything?"

"You've got one too?" Yelled Sarah.

A happy chaos descended, with a lot of people talking at once. Todd closed the email and went to get a couple of bottles of wine out of the fridge. Eventually everyone would hear about Monique's email and whatever was in the magazine Ruby had given to Sarah. For the moment though, it was all about Ruby finally getting a tattoo. There'd be a few hangovers in the morning, but a hangover might be a good way to survive a fourteen hour train journey.