

Ruby 3

Chapter 5 – The Humble Servant

“He was looking at her with his right eye; his left was almost closed up. It would be purple and completely closed by morning, if he lived until morning.”

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Fabio had an unshakable faith in Ruby, they all did. If she wanted them to wander about on foot for miles, he was more than happy to follow. Only Doc seemed troubled by their hiking trip around Lake Naivasha.

“There are some creatures here that look very cute in Disney films.” He said. “In real life, they’ll happily bite you in two and feast on your entrails..... You need to listen to me Ruby.”

“I can see people fishing out on the lake.” Said Ruby. “They don’t look scared.”

“They’re locals, they understand the risks. They also know what they’re doing.”

Had he just accused Ruby of being incompetent ? It certainly sounded as though he had. To Fabio there was a certain amount of excitement in hearing Doc challenge Ruby, saying things he’d never have dared to say. Ruby just looked up at the sky for a minute or so.

“My only fear is people who might mean us harm, people with guns.” Said Ruby. “I don’t sense anyone in the area who means us harm. As for the wild creatures.....They can be dealt with without harming them.”

“What do you mean by dealt with ?” Asked Doc. “You haven’t seen what an angry Hippo can do to an unwary hiker.... I have.....They can weigh over three thousand pounds and run faster than you can.”

“We’ll be fine Doc.” Said Charlotte. “Seriously..... You can stop fondling your rifle.”

Fabio had to chuckle at the look on Doc’s face. It was the look Spider usually referred to as a smacked arse face.

“I don’t fondle..... Checking isn’t fondling.”

“Stop making a drama..... Ruby knows what she’s doing.” Said Fabio.

He rarely made that sort of statement, people were staring at him. Ruby gave him a smile and carried on walking towards the lake shore. Why Lake Naivasha ? There was something about the geology Ruby and Kallina had found ‘encouraging.’ As far as Fabio was concerned, if both of the women he thought of as mothers liked the look of the area, it was alright by him.

“There..... Just past that rock.” Said Ruby, pointing.

It was just past a sign that said ‘Danger – Keep Off This Area,’ about the fourth such sign they’d ignored. Doc just mumbled and carried on fondling his rifle.

“I feel it too, there’s a lot of energy in this place.” Said Kallina. “We can use that.”

“The rock will do actually,” said Ruby, “we can all form a circle around it.”

“Do you mean us too ?” Asked Spider. “Don’t you need us muggles to stand guard ?”

“Not you too..... The Hippos aren’t even aware we’re here.” Said Charlotte. “Aren’t we due a little trust after all these years ?”

“Sorry..... Ok, where do you want us ?”

Fabio found the bellowing Hippos unnerving, the noise sounded so close. Luckily a row of trees hid the edge of the lake, or he might have been begging Ruby to let Spider stand guard.

“I think they must have babies.” Said Sophie.

“Calf, they’re called a calf.” Corrected Doc.

“Relax and choose a spot.” Said Ruby. “We’ll need to sit on the ground, so make sure you don’t sit on anything nasty.”

“These trousers are new.” Said Sarah.

“Mud will clean off..... Sit down everyone, in a rough circle.”

Fabio had never pretended to be a hero, ever. He wedged himself between Spider and Sarah, forcing them to give him space. If there was any danger, he was happy he was sat next to the best man with a gun in the group.

“Do we need to link hands or anything ?” Asked Imran.

“No, just sit there, this may tingle a little.” Said Ruby.

“Eyes open or closed ?” Asked Sarah.

“It doesn’t matter..... Are you joining us Doc ?”

Doc was still on his feet and looking scared. Fabio didn’t blame him, the bellowing sounded far too close for comfort. There was a smell too, quite overpowering when the wind came from the direction of the lake. That smell of the elephant house at the zoo, probably the stink of mountains of Hippo dung.

“You’ll be fine, I guarantee it..... Sit down Doc.” Said Ruby.

Their guide didn’t look happy about it, but he sat on the grass, rifle placed close to his right hand.

“Good.....Don’t get up until I tell you.” Said Ruby.

Fabio hadn’t joined Ruby at Villa Locatelli all those Christmases ago, though Sophie had told him how Ruby had used everyone to gain a little energy. Spiritual energy, mystical energy, the name didn’t really matter, it was all the same. He saw tiny filaments of light stretch from him to Ruby. She was in the centres of the circle, sitting next to the rock. Everyone was giving a little energy, he saw the filaments of light coming out of everyone’s chest.

“I see it, I see the old gateway.” Yelled Kallina. “Take a little more Ruby, they’re strong enough.”

Lau had been there, he’d been at George’s villa on the Amalfi Coast. He’d said the feeling at the time was a rush, but felt like a bad hangover the next morning. As the filaments turned from yellow to orange then to red, Fabio knew Ruby was draining more energy from them all.

“I see it..... A building that wasn’t constructed by humans.” Said Ruby.

He could see it now, a tall tower next to a wall. A tower built of ludicrously thin walls, a tower built by the intelligent creatures who had ruled the Earth long before mankind evolved from the large primates. His people had built the tower and the wall, or at least the creatures he thought of as his people. Like all of the thirteen he was a hybrid, part human and part Das Geheimnis, the ancient creatures of the Karakum desert.

“Oh.....It feels like.....I’m looking at..... Home.” Said Fabio.

“An old image Fabio. That tower will be long gone.” Said Kallina.

A crack like thunder and the sky became instantly darkened, though not by clouds. He could see that Ruby was pointing at a column of light in the distance.

“There, there is the gateway.” She shouted.

For a few seconds Fabio felt as though he’d passed out. He woke to find he was still sitting on the grass, the dampness seeping up through the seat of his trousers. He felt drained, as though he’d helped Monique get through a bottle of cheap sherry the night before. It was full daylight again, the column of light was no longer visible. He could still feel it though, calling out to them. It was another invitation from their ancestors. A much more forceful and persistent invitation than the last. He could feel it demanding their presence. Ruby was still pointing.

"We'll need the vehicles." She said. "The gateway is to the east of Lake Turkana."

"Gateway to where?" Asked Sarah.

"You'll see."

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Olga rinsed the knife and then washed her hands. The doctor didn't like to be brought face to face with the reality of Olga's world, even if she was busy patching up Aron. Olga didn't like the terms gangster or mobster, she considered herself to be a dealer in items that weren't always legal. Others were gangster, her rivals, the bosses who employed animal doctors to patch up their wounded, or doctors who'd been struck off for dubious practises.

"Only the best for my people." She muttered. "No horse doctors, always a proper doctor for them." Her prisoner hadn't talked yet; she'd need to get the knife bloody again. Everyone talked in the end though, everyone. Usually they assumed a woman would go easy on them. Olga soon showed them that assumptions can be dangerous.

"I'll be back soon." She said. "I just want a name for who hired you. It can be our little secret; I'll never tell anyone you gave me the name."

Olga wondered if she was losing her touch. At one time she could always tell who was going to be easy to break and who'd be hard. It was almost like having an infallible extra sense. The guy strapped into the chair had looked scared right away, an easy one to break in ten minutes, tops. An hour later and he still refused to tell her anything. He was looking at her with his right eye; his left was almost closed up. It would be purple and completely closed by morning, if he lived until morning.

"Fuck you." He hissed at her.

"Swear at me again and I'll nail your scrotum to the chair."

Good, there was that look of fear again. He didn't know whether she'd actually do it or not.

"I'll be back in fifteen minutes." She told him. "Then things will get serious."

She left the sound proofed area of the basement and went up the stairs to the floor above. Olga noticed there was still a little red staining at the edge of a few of her finger nails. Luca would have to put up with that, the girl was paid enough. There was no point in using the nail brush, when she'd be getting bloody again soon. Olga pushed open the door to the small kitchen that sometimes doubled as a trauma unit.

"So Luca, will he live?" She asked.

"Just about, clever idea to use duct tape as a bandage." Said Luca. "I gave him something to make him sleep and a transfusion of O Negative. I had to buy that myself, so I'll be charging you for it."

"No problem, always the best for my guys." Said Olga.

Luca was actually wearing a mask and using freshly sterilised equipment. None of the gangs did that for their guys. Not a doctor quite yet, though no one was going to ask to see her credentials. Luca was a final year medical student. Olga had hired quite a few med students to look after her people. They tended to be short of cash and their discretion was guaranteed. No qualified doctor was going to brag about patching up wounded mobsters to finance their education.

"Hmmm ideally he needs reconstructive surgery on the knee." Said Luca. "Otherwise he'll always have a limp."

"Can you do that?" Asked Olga.

"No."

"Then I guess he'll always have a limp."

Luca was looking at her finger nails and frowning. It was as if the damn girl had x-ray vision when it came to blood.

"I take it that's not Aron's blood?" She asked.

"No it's not."

"Will I be patching someone else up later?"

"Definitely not."

"Hmm... I'll be charging you four times what I paid for the O Neg."

Luca had her own way of punishing her, or perhaps it was all about control issues. Upset her and she thought it entitled her to go for an unofficial bonus.

"No, I know the going rate for blood." Said Olga. "Three times is all I'll pay."

"Four or you can find someone else to stitch up your wounded."

Olga had always known it would happen, the day when she had to dig her heels in.

"No, there are always other medical students needing cash." Said Olga.

She was outside of the kitchen and about to go downstairs, when Luca came out to talk to her.

"Fine, make that three times."

"Good..... This won't take long." Said Olga. "I'll be back to pay you before you leave."

She liked Luca, keeping her had put her in a good mood. Not that she wanted to be in a good mood, it might make her go easy on the guy in the basement. He was leaning forward, letting the straps take his weight. Not dead, she could see his chest move as he breathed. He was asleep, the fucker was having a nap.

"Oi." She yelled.

She crouched in front of him and jammed the knife right into his knee. Deep into his knee, all the way into the joint. He woke up really fast, yelling out in pain.

"So, got anything to tell me?" She asked. "All I need is a name."

Sometimes it happened that way if you left them alone with their thoughts. Even the tough ones caved in suddenly and completely.

"It was KC, he's got an office in Budapest now."

"What? No, now you're inventing a story." Said Olga.

"It's the truth, you can check. KC Lacayo is here, right now..... I swear it."

That was a shock, though when she thought about it, it made sense. He only hired the best and he'd never been known to divulge the name of a client. No one knew what KC stood for, or even if his name was really Lacayo. In Spanish the name translated to Humble Servant and was probably an alias. Even his country of birth was uncertain. Some said Colombia, while others swore he was a Peruvian.

"You'd better not be lying to me." She hissed.

"I'm not, check for yourself."

"Oh, I will."

She believed him, there were more subtle lies that were easier to fake. Olga needed an hour or so to check it out of course, before she made a call to Ruby.

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Lau and Trudy were staying in Ruby's flat in Hackney while she was away. It made it easier to pick up phone messages and deal with any post that might arrive. Plus Ruby's place had always felt like their home in London, the place where they planned for the future and sometimes came to nurse their wounds.

"Why do they talk about counting sheep?" He muttered. "It never works."

He'd done the decent thing, letting Trudy use Ruby's bedroom. The sofa bed in the lounge was actually far more comfortable than he'd expected. It was an old and lifelong enemy causing him problems. Insomnia, it had turned his nights into torture for years.

"I need a book, a crappy boring book."

Trudy had already moaned about him listening to the radio at three in the morning. There had also been a few unkind words about what she called 'rummaging about in the wee small hours.' Lau turned on a table lamp and tiptoed over to the bookshelves where Ruby kept the eclectic mix of paperbacks she jokingly referred to as her library.

"Tsk, only Ruby would put Søren Kierkegaard next to Dan Brown."

Lau made a solemn vow to himself, to pick a few books during the day next time. It was hard to see the titles in the dimly lit room. There was a whole row of cheesy SciFi, all bug eyed monsters and aliens are among us type stories. Well-read with crumpled corners, even though Ruby always denied reading them. Lau chose one at random.

"Ahhhh rats take over the world..... Perfect." He muttered.

Lau might have been tired from insomnia, but it was a constant fatigue that had become the norm. It didn't interfere with his alertness, or at least not to a huge degree. He felt the frustration of the man trying to get past the locks on the main door to the building. There was another man with him and a woman in the car, who was becoming a little anxious about the time everything was taking. Lau banged on the bedroom door three times before entering.

"Oh Lau..... Ruby has headphones on her computer. Stream a movie or something." Said Trudy.

"We've visitors, two at the door and another in a car." He said. "They're finding it hard to pick the locks on the street door."

"Well at least they haven't kicked it in." Said Trudy. "I need to dress."

"Of course."

Lau went back into the lounge and felt the men at the door getting angry now. From the outside the building looked like the usual crap conversion of an old Victorian building into half a dozen rented flats. In reality George Polandrous had bought the building through one of his offshore companies, before transferring the title deeds to a retired realtor in Bermuda, who was really a fake identity for Ruby. There were still tenants in the other flats, who had all mentioned how much they appreciated the improvements carried out by the new landlord. Bob on the ground floor had mentioned the funky odour on the second floor staircase, though nothing seemed to cure that. None of the tenants knew the new owner of the building was Ruby Mason on the top floor. One area of improvement had been the door locks. Trudy still looked half asleep as she came into the lounge.

"I can feel them now I'm awake, or at least nearly awake." She said. "If they stand there much longer, someone might call the cops. Problem solved, though Ruby won't appreciate this address going onto a police report."

"No, the tension has gone, I sense..... Pleasure." He said. "They must have cracked the locks and be inside the building."

"Alright Lau, you're our Shogun or whatever..... What do we do?"

Ruby had used the name once, as a sarcastic insult when he'd expressed an opinion that Das Geheimnis should defeat the human race and take over the planet. He'd been young and foolish then, though he did occasionally get ideas he knew Ruby wouldn't like. Lau had been born into the family of a warlord in the part of the globe that is now South Korea. Born in around the year thirteen hundred, so the details were uncertain. Kallina seemed to think he was an illegitimate son of the warlord himself. It was hardly surprising that he had a few anger management issues.

“Burglars, so they’re here to look for information.” He said. “We should hide and listen to their conversations.”

“Are we going to just let them leave ?” Asked Trudy.

“No..... But we need one of them alive. Ruby will want to know who they’re working for.”

Lau was never quite sure about Trudy. She was the one who posted lots of cat pictures on her Facebook timeline, but there was something there, a hint of fire below the surface. As he turned off the table lamp, he caught a glimpse of something in her eyes. To him it looked like excitement.

“I’ll hide in the bedroom, they’ll never know I’m there.” She said.

“Good..... Wait for my signal if we need to fight them.”

“Alright.”

Lau remained in the lounge, flattening himself against a wall near the door. It was easy to make himself invisible to the men coming up the stairs. One of the first skills Kallina had taught them as children was one of her minor magics as she’d called them.

“Think that you’re not a problem to them, that they don’t have to worry about you, that you’re not really there. Then broadcast that idea and keep broadcasting it.” She’d told them.

Lau rested his shoulders against the wall and broadcast what he thought of his ‘I’m not a problem,’ spell. Not a spell of course, or a minor magic. It was a gift from the Das Geheimnis part of his DNA, a power in his mind that humans didn’t possess. It took them ten minutes to crack the lock on the door to Ruby’s flat. Ruby wouldn’t be happy, the lock had cost a small fortune. Lau saw the glow of a penlight moving across the carpet.

“I’ll do the bedroom, you take the kitchen.”

Just one line by one of the men, yet it told Lau the speaker sounded English, with what the tabloids used to call an estuary accent. The man in the kitchen made straight for the washing machine, Lau heard the creek as the door opened on Ruby’s washer. Spider had once taught them all to do the same if they were looking for information in a house where they weren’t supposed to be.

“You’d be amazed how many people think they’re the only ones to think of hiding important things in their washing machine.” Spider had told them.

Lau moved, silently and carefully for a tall and powerfully built man. He placed himself next to the open kitchen door and used the gift again, rendering himself almost invisible to the man looking through the drawer where Ruby kept her kitchen essentials; a can opener, potato peeler and a corkscrew.

“Damn waste of time.” Muttered the man.

A mixed crew, at least by region, the man had a pronounced Scottish accent. Lau knew where Ruby kept her private documents and the man wasn’t even lukewarm, or likely to be any warmer with that attitude. The man was getting colder as he dug through the bottles of cleaning gunk in the cupboard under the sink. He was down on his knees, penlight held in his teeth, as the sound of fighting began in the bedroom.

“Shit.”

The man lost points for hitting his head on the edge of the sink in his haste to stand up. He had a gun on him somewhere; Lau only noticed when it was in the guy’s right hand. Lau knew there were countries where kids carried guns, but in England it was still rare, even for burglars. In his shock, Lau let his concentration slip and the man saw him.

“Jeezz who the hell.....”

Lau hit him, probably a little harder than he’d intended. There was Trudy to consider, the sound of fighting was still coming from the bedroom. The man hit the breakfast bar before falling to the

ground, taking several items in Ruby's mug collection with him. Lau checked for a pulse and found a good strong one in the unconscious man's neck.

"Shit, why did you have to break stuff, she'll hate that." Lau muttered.

The mug Sarah had bought Ruby was in pieces, a souvenir from a trip to Baku. They'd only borrowed her flat for a few nights and some of her precious mugs had been destroyed. He was beginning to feel guilty, his cheeks going red and flushed.

"Trudy..... Are you alright ?" He called.

The fight in the bedroom had ended the man was obviously dead, unless he could survive having his head twisted round that far. Lau still felt for a pulse, even though he knew it was pointless.

"Never mind, the other one is still breathing." He said. "Are you alright Trudy, did he spot you hiding or something ?"

Lau turned on the light, noticing Trudy seemed more flustered than hurt, though she did have the start of a bruise on her left cheek. She even seemed shocked when Lau picked up the gun from the floor. She still she hadn't spoken a word to him.

"Another gun, mine had one too." He said. "Did he go for it ?"

Nothing, no response at all.

"Talk to me Trudy, are you alright ?"

"He started to go through Ruby's things, her drawers, her private things." She said.

"Does she keep private stuff in here ? I thought it was all behind the water tank in the loft."

"No you don't understand Lau." Said Trudy. "He was going through her intimate things."

He didn't want to, but he had to smirk a little.

"You're telling me you started a fight because he was looking through Ruby's underwear ?"

"I knew you wouldn't understand." She snapped at him.

He didn't really, not fully and he suspected no other man would either, but it obviously mattered a hell of a lot to Trudy.

"You're alright, that's the important thing." He said, and was rewarded with a smile.

"Let's go and introduce my guy to the dubious pleasure of being duct taped onto a hard backed kitchen chair." He said.

The unconscious man was placed in a chair. Lau liked to think he was good with duct tape. He was definitely better than most, he was certain of it. He had the man firmly attached to the chair in a matter of minutes.

"The trick is to get plenty of skin caught up in the tape." He said. "It discourages them from struggling too hard."

Trudy had the blinds lifted slightly and was looking out into the street.

"The woman is in a white BMW, just across the street." She said. "What do we do about her ?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing, really ?"

"Yes.....She'll drive off if either of us goes out to her. If we leave her alone, there must be an agreed time for her to wait, before driving away. So we leave her, that's an order."

"An order indeed, who made you boss ?" Asked Trudy.

"You did, you gave me the title of Shogun."

She was grinning at him, before looking out of the window again.

"I have an idea of how to deal with the lady in the BMW." She said. "You start persuading our new friend here to talk while I'm gone."

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It looked like what it was, a huge signpost to where she needed to be. She'd thought the last of the ancient creatures had died, their world gone forever. Kurt had told her the small bubble of their world would end when he died.

"It will shrink Ruby, like a puddle on a sunny day. Quite soon there will be nothing left apart from memories. Keep those memories, cherish them after we've all gone." He'd told her.

The small part of their world in the Karakum desert had gone, she was certain of it. Ruby had tried to return there once, only to find all the gateways had closed. Kurt Trifonov hadn't known everything though, neither had Kallina.

"It's there isn't Kallina?" She asked. "Another part of their world, sealed off from the outside world behind invisible barriers and all sorts of tricks and traps."

"Yes, otherwise there was no point to the invitation. It might be just a hidden valley, a few square miles, or.....Much, much more."

All of her wunderkinds could see the column of light, even Anna claimed to be able to see a slight shimmering out of the corner of her eye. It was an invitation to go inside, a massive invitation using incredible amounts of power.

"So..... How do we get in there?" Asked Monique.

How indeed? Ruby had a few ideas, though none of them were certain to work.

"I'm not sure yet." She said. "I sent Doc back with Anna and Imran to get the vehicles. We're going to be here all night.....I need to sleep on the problem."

Sophie uttered a loud tsk sound and followed it with another.

"Did you just tut at me Sophie?"

"You did tell me to be critical..... Sleeping on it is a bit vague, even for you."

Kallina laughed first and it became infectious.

"I suppose it is vague." Said Ruby. "It has worked in the past though. Kurt used to visit my dreams, and so have several others including Kallina. Whoever created this invitation wants us to succeed in getting inside. It seems sensible to think they'd leave a clue we can easily find. Perhaps I'll find that clue in a dream."

The sound of engines announced Doc was returning with the four wheel drive vehicles. In theory the vehicles weren't allowed where they were, but Doc knew people and Kenya needed tourists. The vehicles brought food for hungry people. Ruby was left alone with Kallina.

"I worry about what we might find if we open the gateway." Said Kallina. "I just didn't want to worry the others. Part of me wants us to leave this place."

"Then the prophecy I saw in London might come true."

"What you saw might be fake, part of a trap."

Ruby had been wondering the same thing, even while Spider was being rescued. Kurt had always told her the feral outcasts of Das Geheimnis would eventually come looking for her and the thirteen.

"You're worried about them aren't you Kallina? Those of us who were experimented on and became beasts. Serge showed me the pictures..... Whole villages destroyed and all of it hushed up. Costa Rica I seem to remember and another atrocity in Guyana. The DGSE had files of the stuff..... Part of the reason the western governments once tried to wipe us out."

"I've fought them, they killed several of the children. You should be worried about them too."

"I know, it's just that they've never attacked me on any of my trips abroad." Said Ruby. "There have been times when someone savage and brutal seemed to be following me, killing everyone who got in the way. Usually it turned out to be Max Krause. I suppose after all those years of looking over my shoulder, I've stopped expecting them to show up."

"If you're worried about Max, I can tell you he's still safely in prison in Botswana."

"Have you visited him?" Asked Ruby.

"A few times, mostly when he was asleep. He's in a dreadful place, foul food and cockroaches. I took him a few chocolate bars once and left them on his bunk."

Ruby wasn't surprised that Kallina had visited Max, she'd thought about doing it herself. Saying you want someone dropped in a hole forever and actually doing it, were completely different things. He posed a constant threat to the thirteen though and couldn't be let out.

"Have you talked to him, is he alright? Mentally I mean?"

"Oh, he's fine in that way." Said Kallina. "If I couldn't break him by keeping him locked up in that sweat box in Yemen for all those years..... He's thriving on the heat, even joking about the bed bugs. You know Max."

"I do, which is why I know he has to stay there. You're not being tempted to break him out are you?"

"No, no of course not. I do feel sorry for him.....But he'd only try to hurt my.....Our children."

"Hey..... We should get something to eat before those children eat it all."

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Darkness had arrived with the suddenness it reserved for places closer to the equator than North London. The speed with which dusk became darkness still surprised her, it was probably something she'd never get used to. She had a sleeping bag over her shoulder when her phone told her Lau was calling.

"Hi.....I hope this isn't a call to say my goldfish died."

Poor Lau, she could almost see him crushed under tons of anxiety. It took him a while to calm down and tell her about the burglars and the information he'd persuaded one of them to give him. It took even longer for him to tell her that her collection of mugs was now less of a collection than it had been.

"As long as you're both alright Lau.... Tell Trudy I'm glad she got away with just a drenching. It was a silly thing to do, but it was done for the right reasons."

He went on to tell her the name she already knew, though it was nice to have it confirmed. Ruby looked at Charlotte and mouthed KC at her. Olga had called an hour earlier with the same name. Lau needed his moment of triumph, so she congratulated him and pretended the name was new to her.

"Well done Lau.....No, just carry on as you are, I'll arrange for someone to see Mr Lacayo."

She's already agreed for Olga to go and see The Humble Servant. It was her part of the world after all and when it came to getting answers out of mobsters.....Olga was the obvious choice to do it. After the call Ruby took her sleeping bag outside, she had a need to sleep under the stars.

"I've built up the fire and young Sophie has promised to add extra logs all night." Said Doc.

"Thank you."

Doc headed off arm in arm with Anna, which didn't come as a surprise. It had the makings of a romantic night under the stars, she thought her people were probably pairing off to enjoy it. She'd already seen Spider and Sarah climbing into the back of a vehicle with a pile of blankets. It was likely to be cold as the night went on, Ruby zipped up her sleeping bag. She was going to sleep sitting on the ground, her back up against the wheel of one of the four wheel drives. It gave her a good view of their camp and the column of light.

"Can I get you anything?" Asked Sophie.

"No, I'm fine."

She slept fitfully, waking often. Always Sophie was there, tending the fire. It felt as though they were the only two people awake in the whole of Africa. At some point in the middle of the night, Ruby found herself walking away from the camp.

“Am I sleepwalking?” She muttered.

It had never happened before, she turned around and saw herself, her own body still leaning against the wheel, still fast asleep. Sophie was still there, wide awake and still prodding the fire with a stick.

“Well..... This is different.”

Ruby gave in to the pull which had probably brought her into a weird dream state. The column of light was obviously just a signpost. Ruby walked right through it and across the grass behind it. The odd thing was that she knew she was dreaming, yet everything looked and sounded real. She could hear her boots crunching over the grass, even the sound of her own breathing.

“This is the weirdest dream.....Can I?”

No, trying to walk through the large bush was impossible, like trying to walk through something that didn't hurt or resist too hard, but refused to get out of the way. She walked around the bush and followed the roadway, which she knew hadn't been there the day before.

“Don't overthink it girl.” She muttered.

The world was changing around her, different types of trees, a road that went right up to a wall with a large wooden gate in it. The tower told her she was back there, in the world when the ancient people had ruled the planet, her ancestors. There were people in front of the gate, dozens of.....No not human people, it was them, Das Geheimnis. Hundreds of them, dressed in dark robes, kneeling on the ground.

“You know why you're here..... Here of your own freewill.”

A female talking to the ones on their knees, talking in a language Ruby shouldn't have understood, yet she did.

“Your sacrifice is the only way to seal the gateways.”

Everything changed again, Ruby was the female and looking out of her eyes. There were the sudden feelings of guilt and depression, she knew what was going to happen. No way of stopping it though, she couldn't even change the words coming out of her mouth.

“Your names will be carved on all the holiest of our holy places. You will not be forgotten.”

Another change and Ruby was still the female, still seeing and feeling what she felt. She was on top of the tower, looking out along the road. The grief hit her, making her feel physically ill. No, no there had to have been another way.

“No!”

They were there, all the hundreds of the Das Geheimnis, all burning. Still on their knees, they'd made the ultimate sacrifice of self-immolation. Ruby understood it had taken their lives, their sacrifice to seal the gateways. Why though? What needed to be sealed inside at such a dreadful cost?

The female went down the stairs, Ruby had no say in the matter. Outside the tower she could see the flames, feel the heat, smell the burning flesh. Hundreds of them..... All dying in such a dreadful way... But why?

“No..... Why? I don't want to see anymore.”

“Are you alright Ruby? You were screaming.”

She was back in the camp, still zipped up in her sleeping bag. Sophie was in front of her looking worried. Spider was behind her, still pulling up his shorts.

“They all died Sophie, burned to death.... How are we going to open the gateway now?”

“Are you alright ? Shall I get Kallina ?” Asked Sophie.

Ruby began to cry and she was still crying when Sarah brought her a cup of tea.

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