

Ruby

Chapter 16 – A Small Detour

“A Bleve, Ruby had heard the word on a science video at college once, a boiling liquid expanding vapour explosion.”

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Ruby was dreaming when Olga woke her, not a dream that seemed portentous in any way, just a normal everyday dream.

“I’ve made some food, it’s lunchtime.” Said Olga.

Ruby stretched and got out of her chair and then she smelt something good being cooked.

“I was dreaming of Jurgis for the first time since we left Romania. Nothing heavy, just having breakfast with him and you in Budapest.”

“You’ve outgrown needing his wisdom Ruby; you’re your own woman now.”

They hadn’t brought any fresh food and the cooler box had been another casualty of their hasty departure from Baku. Olga had a box of tins and small camping stove, yet the aroma of the food she was cooking was irresistible. Several of their fellow passengers were watching enviously, especially the two young guys who were scouting the route for a motor rally.

“I’m surprised they haven’t been over to try and get some food.” Said Ruby.

“Having a wounded member of our party with a drip in his arm, seems to have discouraged them a little.”

Olga was smiling at her, while she stirred a large saucepan.

“How is Spider ? Can he walk ?”

“Yes, he’s been to use the bathroom twice. He’s walking a bit lopsided, but he’ll be fine.”

Mention of the bathroom reminded Ruby of Sarah. They’d been at sea for a good five hours and Sarah must have needed to pee, unless Spider had held her over the side. Ruby had used the facilities before going to sleep and she’d used far worse in some South London pubs, at least the sink had hand wash and running water.

“Did Sarah make a fuss about..... the facilities ?” She asked.

“She tried, until I threatened to break her arm.”

Olga was smiling, but Ruby knew Olga was quite capable of carrying out the threat, if Sarah became too annoying. Ruby could see Sarah, being chatted up by two young guys who looked like students, but there was no sign of Serge. Spider was once again asleep in his chair, but the drip had gone. Leo was helping Olga, unwrapping paper plates and disposable cutlery.

“I think,” said Olga, “that the food is ready. Get Sarah and Serge for me please.”

“Where is Serge ?”

“He went to get another look at the Russian in the cargo hold, he thought there was something a bit odd about him.”

“I’ll tell him lunch is ready.”

Ruby tapped Sarah on the shoulder first, telling her food was ready and ignoring the lecherous looks of her newfound friends. There seemed to be a lot of young men on the crew of the ship, most of them no older than Aydin. Ruby passed several of them as she descended into the ship and approached the main cargo hold. She found Serge on his way back to the upper deck.

“I thought you’d never wake up.” He said.

“It was a tiring night.”

They kissed, their relationship had reached the stage where they kissed when they met and kissed as they parted. Relationship ! Ruby shuddered as she thought of it in those terms. For all she knew Serge might have a huge wife and six kids somewhere.

“Are you married ?” She asked him.

“You British are all crazy, no I’m not married.”

Ruby nodded at him and put her arm through his, walking back onto the deck and informing him that Olga had managed to cook another masterpiece of a meal out of a few tins.

“She should open a restaurant.” Said Serge.

“Why not, Kallina was a chef once.”

Olga was nudging Spider awake as they returned and he looked much better, scaring the tourists with his Sunday best lopsided grin.

“Are you still glad you came with me ?” Ruby asked him.

“Ecstatic Ruby, fucking ecstatic !”

He said it with a smile and Ruby picked up that he was still in pain, but happy to be with them. The tourists moved a little further away and Olga dished up six plates of her famous goulash and rice. It tasted as good as the aroma it had given off while cooking and Ruby asked for a second helping. There was even wine, red of course and served at deck temperature.

“Has anyone counted the crew ?” She asked.

“Thirty two, with the captain,” said Serge, “none seem armed, but there’ll be a gun cupboard somewhere.”

Olga stopped eating and hit herself on the thigh.

“I forgot Ruby. Aydin came by, it appears Captain Jafarov would like to see our passports before we reach Turkmenbashi.”

“Which ones ?” Said Spider with a grin.

“He’ll be looking for a bribe.” Said Sarah.

Ruby sipped her wine and would dearly love to have gone back to sleep until evening, but she had a lot to do.

“Good, I want to see our captain. And we’re not going to Turkmenbashi.”

They all stopped chewing and looked at her.

“Isn’t that where the ferry goes ?” Asked Sarah.

“I need to see the captain, but Serge will explain what I intend to do after it gets dark.”

Ruby left them before the inevitable avalanche of questions. Serge knew the plan and they were less likely to pester him with nonsense, especially Sarah. She walked to the rear of the ferry and then took the first walkway down. Two young men in tatty T shirts and jeans blocked the corridor to the captain’s lounge area. Their attire seemed to be the standard uniform for the crew.

“I’m not here to moan about anything, Captain Jafarov wanted to see our papers.”

They smiled and Ruby took the opportunity to make them hers. All it took was one of her special smiles and they’d do anything for her, even die for her if she asked. Two down out of thirty two, she could easily turn them all into her acolytes before they went on a bit of a detour. The passengers she’d leave alone, they’d just have to take their chances in the desert.

“I don’t want to be disturbed while I’m with the captain.” She said.

“Of course Miss Ruby.”

Captain Jafarov looked nervous as Ruby put her head round his door without knocking. Passengers usually meant hassle and his crew mainly existed to make sure that he met as few passengers as possible.

"I believe you wanted to see our papers?"

"Ahh yes, the young lady Jalil bought tickets for. Sit, please."

He gestured towards a chair on the other side of his desk and found a piece of paper from a bulging in-tray on his desk.

"Let me see..... six people, travelling under all sorts of strange names and I believe you're using the passport of Gertrude....."

Ruby interrupted his flow, she knew he was just going to end up demanding money and she wasn't in the mood to pay him.

"Yes, yes captain. This has all been dealt with by Jalil." She barked.

"Don't take that tone with me. I know the authorities in Turkmenbashi and things could become very unpleasant for you."

She'd had enough, Ruby reached over the desk and grasped his hand. She gave him just a little pain, enough to make him gasp and try to pull his hand away. Ruby paralysed his arm and let the pain creep up a little, now the captain was sweating and looking towards the door.

"Your men are mine now captain."

She stopped the pain and gave him just a little pleasure, making him smile and look relieved. Ruby felt into his mind and found little except greed and cruelty. She smiled at him and he became devoted to her, a little more of her gift and he was hers forever.

"No need for pain when pleasure is much better, don't you agree?"

"Yes, yes I agree completely." He answered.

She let go of his clammy hand, noting the look of disappointment on his face. The rest of the crew she could use just a smile on, but she wanted a deeper control over the captain and that required a little more carrot than stick.

"I'd quite like you to change course soon, I have the coordinates."

Ruby took a piece of paper from her small Gucci bag and once again had a strange feeling of foreboding. She shook the feeling off and handed the paper to Captain Jafarov.

"Take us here and wait for us for two days. If we don't come back you can then continue on to Turkmenbashi."

He took the paper from her and simply stared at it for a few seconds.

"Where are you going?" He asked.

"Into the desert, where exactly isn't important."

"The authorities, they might look for us."

"Use the radio, tell them you have engine problems."

"But the passengers....."

She held his hand again and picked up the emotions of someone with mild OCD, who was being asked to change a long established pattern of behaviour.

"It will be fine captain," she told him, "the passengers will just have to wait, or take their chances travelling overland. It will be fine and everything is as it should be."

"Yes of course, everything is as it should be." He repeated.

She waited while he called Aydin and gave the new co-ordinates. There was no argument, none of his crew ever argued with Captain Jafarov. The captain was chuckling now, he seemed relieved about something.

"I had to be on time arriving in port, but everything is fine, everything is as it should be."

Ruby picked up an image of Max from his mind and understood why there was a Russian on board, an armed Russian guarding a container. She hadn't expected Max to be so resourceful, she'd obviously underestimated him.

"We're good friends aren't we captain?" She asked.

"The best, oh yes, the best."

"Good. Now I want you to tell me everything you know about Mr Otto Leitner and everything you agreed to do for him."

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George had always associated landing in a foreign country with lights below, a welcoming new city for him to explore. As the pilot announced they were about to land, all he could see out of the window was darkness. Complete darkness, not a single lamp post or lit bedroom window broke the wall of darkness around them.

"Where the hell are we?" Asked Terry.

"I've no idea," answered Sarge, "but I don't think we're here for long."

George felt like a piece of very expensive freight. All his team were very keen on keeping him safe, they just weren't saying much to him. He felt the aircraft bounce as they landed, a rough landing at night, just what he needed. Someone was waving batons with lights on the end and their pilot was moving off the runway and into the dark.

"Get your kit together, we're here!" Shouted Sarge.

"Wherever here is." Said one of the not-Terrys.

The plane rumbled over rough ground and came to a halt, the pilot turning the interior lighting from a dull glow to something they could see by. Almost immediately someone outside began shouting and the lights became a dull glow again.

"They seem a jumpy lot Sir. Any idea where we are?" Asked Sarge.

"No idea, only that we're about two hours flight time from our destination in Turkmenistan."

"We could be lots of places then," added Terry, "none of them nice."

The rear doors lowered and they could see three soldiers in fatigues, all wearing balaclavas. Fatigues all tend to look the same at night and George had no idea where the soldiers might be from.

"Quick, you need to come with us." Said one of the men in balaclavas.

They had three heavy pods full of equipment to carry, so they weren't going anywhere particularly quickly. His team cursed and banged knuckles in the dark, but they lifted the pods and followed their new allies.

"Are we sleeping here then?" Asked Terry.

Another of the soldiers began helping to carry one of the pods, they seemed desperate to get George's team to wherever they were taking them.

"No, you go now, you have to leave in the other plane right away."

"But we're tired, we've just had a nine hour flight." Said Sarge.

George only realised one of the fighters was a woman, when she spoke.

"No, it's bad for you to be here, very bad, you must go."

They all had different accents, one man sounded Russian, another could have been Greek or Italian. The girl sounded to have a Middle Eastern accent, perhaps Iran or Iraq. George was nudged by Terry and noticed a burned out truck not far away.

"That was recent," said Terry, "and the runway has been repaired in the last few days."

Their eyes were just getting used to the dark, when the shadow of a huge Russian transport plane came into view. A good four times the size of the old RAF plane they'd just left, there was something about the chunkiness of the plane that shouted cold war Russia.

"Hurry, hurry, you must hurry!" Said the woman.

They passed another burned out vehicle, the metal still giving off heat. George and his team began to understand the need to hurry and they almost jogged towards the Russian built plane. The rear doors were open and a man wearing a plain grey flying suit greeted them in a slight Scottish accent.

"Get aboard Sir, they're expecting more action tonight, or so they've been telling me."

He helped them get the pods aboard and then he pressed a button on the wall and the rear doors began to close.

"We're taking off right away, please get seated and belted up."

There was a proper seating area beyond the cargo bay, a seating area more reminiscent of a passenger jet than an old turbo prop transport. There was the noise of static as their pilot prepared to speak over the cabin speakers.

"We'll be in the air in two minutes gentlemen, get yourselves comfortable."

The man from the rear walked through and found a seat just in front of George.

"Best we could arrange quickly Sir," he said, "they've been getting a bit agitated since we arrived a couple of hours ago, they're expecting another attack."

Then he was gone, through the door at the far end of the cabin and into the cockpit area. George did up his seatbelt and watched more lighted batons being waved. A few seconds later there was the kick in the back as the huge plane accelerated and hurtled down the runway.

"I reckon they were Kurdish separatists or something." Said Terry.

"More likely Islamic State, I'm sure I saw a black flag." Added a non-Terry.

"Or Syrians," someone said, "do they have women fighters?"

There was more conjecture about their recent allies, as the plane carried on climbing and turned to head towards the settlement of Oboy in Turkmenistan. George had his own ideas, but he didn't really care, even terrorists probably need the odd favour from the British Government. Good old Foxy, when you have few bases and no aircraft carriers, you need to improvise.

"Who do you think they were Sir?" Asked Serge.

"I have no idea and I don't really care and nor should you."

"Yes of course Sir, sorry Sir."

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"We should kill him, just to be safe." Said Sarah.

It had taken Ruby just over two hours to convert the crew into adoring acolytes, the main problem now was stopping them from following her around. When they'd come to take care of Ali, four of her new friends had given him a beating before she could intervene. Ruby looked at the swelling under his eye and the gash on his neck and she felt sorry for the Russian. He'd just wanted to earn a few extra dollars and as for planning to kill all the passengers.... There was nothing malicious about it, it was just business.

"What do you think?" She asked Serge.

"If we tie him up, he'll need feeding and looking after. Can't you, you know, put the fluence on him or something?"

"I'm just worried he might become an enemy again, just at the worst possible moment."

She remembered Kallina's words about having confidence in her abilities and then she found something in Ali's mind that made any kind of 'fluence' unnecessary.

“How much to change sides Ali ?” She asked.

“I don’t think he speaks English.” Said Sarah.

“Oh yes he does and I won’t ask him again. How much to betray Max ?”

He was smiling at her with his good eye and stood up and sat on an old desk in the container he’d been pretending to guard.

“Five thousand dollars.” He said.

Ruby didn’t argue, she took two thousand dollars from her bag and handed it to him.

“You get the rest when we leave the ferry. I don’t expect you to come with us Ali, but I do expect you to help us fight the pirates.”

Spider had limped into the hold; he seemed to want to prove he was fit, by limping around after her and arriving everywhere late.

“What pirates ?” He asked.

“The ones Max has joined, the Iranians who will be waiting for us in about three hours time.”

Ruby looked straight at Aydin, who she’d promoted to the role of unofficial leader of the crew.

“He’ll need his Kalashnikov, or there’s no point in paying him. Make sure he’s on deck and ready to fight.”

She left the hold, walking slowly this time, giving Spider a chance to keep up.

“How many pirates ?” Asked Serge.

“If Max wasn’t lying to Ali, about three patrol boats full of them, with modern assault rifles.”

“We should arm the crew.” Said Serge

“Yes, get that started and tell the passengers, some of them may have weapons.” Said Ruby.

Serge went and Ruby was left with Sarah and Spider, the two friends who’d been with her since London, since a boozy night in her Hackney flat.

“It’s bad isn’t it ?” Asked Sarah.

“Yes it’s bad, but it is quite difficult to stop a ship that weighs hundreds of tons and doesn’t want to stop and we have a slight advantage.”

“What’s that ?” Asked Spider.

“We’ve changed course and they’ll be waiting in the wrong place.”

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Max had missed Ruby twice, he’d arrived late twice, he was fed up with being late for the action.

Cynthia had died in Varna and he’d valued her, he’d even developed an affection for her. Then his entire team of Russian’s had died in Khulo and he still had no real idea how Ruby had done it.

“أسرع.” (Faster). He shouted at the man at the controls.

The patrol boat hit the waves a little harder and did seem to move a little quicker. Max had a little Arabic, just enough to let the crew know what he wanted. The leader of the pirates spoke a little Russian and they’d managed to achieve a weird conversation in about half Arabic and Russian.

“Here, we need to be here in three hours.”

He stabbed his finger at a point on the map and hoped the man steering the boat understood him.

“He knows, leave him alone.” Said the pirate leader.

“These people have escaped me twice, I can’t lose them again.”

The men called their leader Oruç, but Max had no idea if that was his name or some kind of epithet.

Max simply spoke to the man when he needed to and called him nothing at all. Oruç walked over to him and spoke in a quiet voice.

“Please Max, my men hate having you on board as it is. Please, for your own sake, don’t provoke them.”

Max understood that if anyone could ever be said to have a national obsession, it was the Iranians and their hatred of all things American.

"The other two boats are going to let us attack first?" He asked.

"Yes, they'll stay a little south, waiting in case the ferry alters course. You'll get your crack at the Night Princess Max, don't worry."

Max checked his equipment for about the tenth time, everything had to work perfectly. The incendiary warheads for his two MRO-A, single shot rocket launchers, had a line in Russian on them that always amused him. It appeared the contents were 'mildly toxic to humans.'

This time it would work, he'd be waiting for the ferry, nothing could get in his way now.

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They'd only seen one member of crew, the pilot and whoever else might be in the cockpit, had kept out of sight. None of their trainers had come along, so the man in a plain grey flying suit was helping him put on his parachute.

"You can't go wrong, jump and it'll open straight away." He said.

"We had a practise jump in Cyprus." Said George.

"How many?"

"Just the one, from a thousand feet."

A vet had once told him a much loved cat needed to be put to sleep, the face in front of him had much the same expression.

"Just one! You'll land hard jumping from five hundred, remember to roll."

Sarge was helping the others go through their well-practiced routine of checks and tests to make sure their harnesses and parachutes would work perfectly. Small drone chutes had been fitted to their weapon pods, so that in theory they'd land not too far away. Snowy had explained it all to them in Akrotiri;

"You're dropping from five hundred feet so that you'll be together when you land. The enemy will have less time to fire at you on the way down and the aircraft itself may well be low enough to remain undetected. Most importantly for your team, you won't have time to drift into the next country."

He'd said it with a smile, but they had understood. They were novices, they were barely trained idiots who should still be doing another five weeks of basic training.

"Jump in ten minutes." Their pilot announced.

Sarge got the men into an orderly line and then he grabbed the first pod. The pods were going first of course, no one wanted four hundred pounds of kit hitting them on the back of the neck. The time seemed to go impossibly fast and the doors were being opened as the pilot announced one minute to drop. The doors opened sideways, which was different to the RAF plane, but seemed better for jumping out of.

"Get the Pods out!"

The three pods went out of the doors. All their weapons, tracking equipment, water, food and just about everything else. Dropped over the desert to be found as soon as they landed. If one was lost they'd survive, no one wanted to think what might happen if they only found one of them, or none.

"Go!" Shouted the man in the grey flying suit.

Sarge went first and then they went in the order Snowy had given them, George jumping just before Terry. It was dark outside the doors, not a single light in the darkness. There was a moon and a clear sky, the pilot had told them an hour into the flight. Once on the ground their eyes would adjust, now though they seemed to be jumping into oblivion.

“Good luck Sir.” Said Terry.

George walked out of the door and dropped into the darkness, closing his eyes and counting to twenty. He opened them and saw his canopy, fully open and showing dark in the moonlight. First step over, now he just had to avoid landing on anything sharp, hard or dangerous in any one of a dozen other ways. Of course he had no chance to steer the chute, he was just along for the ride. Someone quicker and better trained could have probably changed where they were going to land, George just watched and hoped. Someone was looking after him though, he landed on some soft dry sand and after tumbling for a few yards, he was down and safe. He was out of his harness and rolling up the chute when Sarge found him.

“No need to do that Sir, we’re not taking them with us.”

“Of course.”

He dropped the harness and looked into the night, he could just make out a rocky outcrop quite close, he’d been lucky.

“Are the others down ok ?” He asked.

“I’ve seen Terry and two others, they’re opening the pods.”

George followed Sarge and they’d only gone a few yards before finding all three pods lying on the sand, with several men using small pocket torches to get out the contents.

“Anyone seen Eric ?” Asked Terry.

Eric was one on the not-Terrys, one who’d actually experienced combat drops with the UK army.

“We’ll look for him once we’re kitted up.” Said Sarge.

It all came out of the pods and it all seemed to work, including two GPS gadgets that could take them directly to Oboy. George offered to carry Eric’s rifle and most of his kit, he’d only been given a hand gun to carry. It went against George’s nature to litter the desert, but they weren’t going to bury the pods or the vast amount of packing material that had been put around their kit.

“Everyone ready ?” Asked Sarge.

They all said yes and they looked ready. Armed with the best weapons George could find and dressed in state of the art all terrain uniforms, they looked professional and dangerous.

“Who dropped in front of Eric ?”

“Me.”

“Where did you land ?”

He pointed into the darkness, a little to their rear at about eight o’clock from Sarge.

“I was behind him.”

The not-Terry pointed to a point just a little towards nine o’clock and Sarge headed directly between the two points.

“Helmet lights on and keep your eyes open.” Said Sarge.

It was like day with all their helmet lights on, bright lights that lit up the deserts, but sadly would only give them a few hours of light before the batteries ran out. Eric was easy to find, he was still stuck about four feet off the ground, skewered and dead.

“Jeez, what the hell did he land on ?” Asked Terry.

“Looks like an old rusty tanker.”

Perhaps left over from a long forgotten war, or one of the motor rallies that occasionally crossed the desert. The tanker had died a long time ago and then it had rusted, until just one metal rib of the main tank remained, like a sword pointing into the sky. Eric had landed on the sharp metal rib and it had pierced his chest, probably killing him instantly.

“Talk about fucking bad luck !”

“Have some respect.”

They found it hard to get Eric off the rusty metal, but eventually he was laid on the sand and Sarge checked him over for any personal items.

“Do we bury him ?” Asked Terry.

Sarge turned on his hand held device, his face lighting up from the small display screen.

“We’re two miles from target location.” He said.

Snowy had said the plane would try to land them between two and three miles from target, so George didn’t see any problem.

“We can get to the target well before Ruby Sir, we have time.”

Everyone was looking at him, George realised he was expected to make an executive decision.

“Yes, of course, bury him. Mark the position on the GPS, I’ll get his body collected.”

He didn’t need to add, “if we survive,” that went without saying. They worked quickly, scooping out a hole about four feet deep in the sand. They were joking and telling each other stories as they worked. Death was obviously an occupational hazard to them, nothing to make a huge fuss about. As long as it was someone else’s death of course. Death really was like religion; you could have a good chuckle about it, just so long as it wasn’t yours.

“Lights off and hand torches only,” said Sarge, “no knowing what might be waiting for us.”

Eric was under a pile of sand and they were heading due west and towards the Caspian Sea. Two miles away was the small settlement of Oboy, which for some reason was almost worshiped by Das Geheimnis. Sarge was in front and Terry at the rear, George jogging along somewhere in the middle.

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It had looked like changing course had prevented an attack by the pirates. Night had come and their destination was fast approaching, when one of the crew spotted something on the radar. A little later the lights appeared.

“Two patrol boats, keeping their distance.” Said Aydin.

Yas simply nodded, he followed Aydin everywhere, though he said little. Ruby noticed that he was carrying an old bolt action rifle. The crew had found about five assorted weapons; sadly most were ancient and no match for modern assault rifles.

“They’ll be waiting for Max.” Said Ali.

“They won’t wait forever,” said Ruby, “get the passengers ready for battle.”

Travelling conditions on the Night Princess didn’t encourage the elderly or infirm and most of the passengers were male and under thirty. None of them had weapons, but one of the guys scouting for a rally was a weekend warrior. He was in the Army Reserve, the outfit known for years as the TA, but recently renamed.

“I won a cup last year for marksmanship.” He’d proudly told them.

Olga had given him an SA80 out of their weapons bags and enough ammo to keep an army at bay. The young man had grinned at her and gone to find a good spot to use his new toy. They had a few spare weapons, but few of the crew or passengers had ever fired a weapon. Captain Jafarov had fought insurgents somewhere, but he was needed on the bridge. In the end they had two spare Kalashnikovs, so Ruby had grabbed one and swung it over her shoulder. She ignored the stunned look on Spider’s face and took him through the key points of the weapon.

“I have some of Kallina’s memories,” she said, “or Baba Yaga’s, I’m never quite sure which.”

“They’re coming !” Shouted Yas.

The two patrol boats had given up on Max and had obviously decided to attack without him. Ruby ran to the rail and noticed the lights were moving slowly towards them, both heading for the port

side of the ferry. Leo was right at the front of the ferry, a heavy machine gun leant on the rail and held in place by a clumsy metal bracket. It was home made by Aydin, but it would do the job.

“Don’t wait for them to fire first.” Said Ruby.

“I won’t.” Replied Leo.

Serge pulled Ruby back, into the cover one of the chimneys gave.

“You have to get there Ruby, or it’s all been for nothing.”

They’d come so far and now they were almost at the coast. The part of the Caspian Sea where the salty water met the dunes. A point about a hundred and fifty kilometres south of Turkmenbashi was the coordinates she’d given the captain and soon they’d be there. From there they could go ashore and it was barely an eight mile walk to Oboy.

Ruby knew the Iranian patrol boats were close, Leo had started firing bursts from his machine gun. She wanted to look, but Serge held her and refused to let her go.

“Promise me you’ll stay here. I need to help the others.” He said.

“Fine, I promise.”

The pirates were firing, she heard a series of clangs as bullets hit the chimney above her. She hoped that Captain Jafarov was keeping his head down on the bridge, someone needed to be keeping them on the right course. There was an explosion as a bullet hit a barrel left on deck, the burning fluid covering the deck only a few feet from her. Hands then, hands pulling at her and shouting at her in Azeri and then repeating in English.

“Ruby, get up !” Shouted Yas.

He was pulling her towards a set of steps leading down, into the relative safety of the interior of the ferry. They passed the body of one of the crew, burned beyond recognition. Ruby had a better idea than hiding.

“I need to be on deck, I can hurt the patrol boats. Do you understand Yas ?”

He nodded and stopped pulling at her, instead following her as she walked calmly to the rail and watched the patrol boat turning towards them again. Yas aimed his weapon and fired, but Ruby doubted that he’d worry the patrol boat with the accuracy of his fire.

“Move away from me Yas, well away, get to the top of the stairs.”

Ruby picked up the remains of the barrel with a part of her gift she’d never really mastered before. The burning oil too, became drawn to her, circling her like an impatient fiery wind. The body of the crew member joined the debris and flame that circled her, getting closer and closer to her skin. She added another two barrels of the unknown liquid, controlling the blast as they too added to the inferno that hurtled around her. She allowed it all to come close, feeling the heat and relishing it, knowing it couldn’t hurt her.

“Miss Ruby !” Shouted Yas.

“I’ll be fine, just keep out of the way.”

She added to the heat of the fire, using every trick Kallina had put into her mind. The patrol boat wasn’t firing, they were all too busy watching what Ruby was doing on the ferry. When the patrol boat was as close as it was likely to get, she threw the entire mass of metal, body and super-heated fluid at the patrol boat. A Bleve, Ruby had heard the word on a science video at college once, a boiling liquid expanding vapour explosion. She sent the Bleve at the patrol boat and it ripped the light vessel apart, actually vaporising parts of it. Ruby hadn’t been very attentive to the video at the time, but now she’d actually created a Bleve. She wondered what her teacher, Mr Edwards would have thought. The patrol boat burned with an unnatural intensity, the screams from the crew going

on for a surprisingly long time. Yas was looking at her with a new respect and a little fear. Olga came running across the still smouldering deck;

"There's another patrol boat the other side." She said.

"The starboard." Correct Yas.

"They're trying to get on board the Ferry !" Yelled Olga.

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Penny had been staying in the office until late, just in case George might want to contact her, or even Ruby, there was still a hope she might call. The phone rang on George's desk, not the direct line, but the line the night service came through to.

"Hello Polandrous Foundation." Said Penny, in her best office voice.

"Hello, I'm sorry to call so late. Is Mr George Polandrous available ?"

The voice sounded like a woman just beyond middle age and something about the tone of voice suggested someone in trouble.

"I'm afraid he's abroad on business, can I help ?"

"Is it Romania he's visiting ?"

Penny was alert now, the call seemed to be veering towards dangerous areas concerning Ruby.

"Who is this ?" She asked.

"This is Mrs Mason, Ruby's mother. I had to call, we found out who she was working for from a helpful young man at the Foreign Office."

Penny's heart missed a beat, of course, the Foreign Office would have contacted them about the death of their daughter. How stupid of her and how thoughtless, Penny should have called them, or at least have sent a messenger to them with a condolence card.

"It's such a shock you see," Mrs Mason continued, "we may not have been close, but a daughter is a daughter and her father..... He hasn't been out of the house since we heard."

"I'm so sorry Mrs Mason, I should have contacted you, it's unforgiveable. Ruby wasn't away on business, she was touring Europe with a few friends."

There was a moments silence and Penny could hear Mrs Mason asking someone for a pen that worked.

"Could you give me the names of these friends ?"

"I'm afraid not, we knew very little about your daughter's home life."

Penny hated lying, but there really was no option. She could hardly say that Ruby had gone to look for a Bulgarian terrorist, in the company of a girl with a personality disorder and an ex-drug dealer. Besides, by the sound of it, Ruby didn't want her parents knowing her business.

"So you have no idea why she was near.... Let me see, Băneasa in southern Romania ?"

"No sorry, she was on her own time, taking a vacation."

"But you did know she was dead ?"

"We were contacted by the Foreign Office, probably when they called you."

There was more silence.

"She was a bit wild you know, not like either of us really."

"Oh I didn't know, she never talked about her childhood."

Penny had once heard Ruby go on for an hour about her control freak father and her indifferent mother. She wasn't going to mention that though.

"I had her late in life, we'd almost given up. I had a lot of complication late in the pregnancy and then Ruby shows up, looking all healthy and heavy for a premature birth."

"Oh really, that must have been a nice surprise."

More silence and then the sound of sobbing.

“A cuckoo her father called her once. He was angry and said someone had mixed up the babies in the hospital. He’s a good man and he never called her anything bad again. We never bothered with tests or anything, she was ours and we loved her.”

More sobbing and Penny just remained quiet and let Ruby’s mother cry herself out.

“Her father was right in a way.”

“How is that Mrs Mason ?”

“She never has really felt like our daughter.”

~ ~

Joy was thirty five and actually enjoyed her job, though even her husband didn’t know she’d launched missiles against at least a dozen targets during her career. It wasn’t a bunker as most people thought; she worked from a light and airy room on an air force base in Ohio. They even had open days to show the kids the planes, though none ever saw the drone control room.

“How long now Joy ?”

They all used first names, it made it feel even more like just an ordinary job. Joy knew that the feed from her drone would be used with the material from satellites, but she never saw that information. Her job was to get the drone where it was needed and then take appropriate action. Luckily on this occasion she’d been told the drone was purely there to observe and give accurate co-ordinates.

“Low winds over the Caspian today Bob, I’ll be there in under an hour.”

The drone was official given a designation of HS4637, but Joy thought of this particular drone as Jennifer. Bob knew about her little eccentricities, she’d told him after their relationship had changed after the Christmas party.

“How is Jennifer doing today ?” Bob Asked.

She watched the screen as though she herself was flying low over the Caspian Sea. Her cell phone provider couldn’t give her a decent voice connection in her kitchen, but Jennifer sent her data via a military satellite and the Caspian was on her screen, in full and glorious HD. If it had been daylight the screen would have been in colour, but even at night the moonlight was sufficient to give superb clarity.

“Jennifer has never let me down,” said Joy, “if they’re alive she’ll find them.”

~ ~

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