

## Ruby

### Chapter 17 – Abandon Ship

**“Well done Ruby,” said Olga, “you’ve just cost the American taxpayer at least twenty million dollars.”**

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“Our friend with the SA80 is earning his keep.” Said Olga.

Two ladders with hooked handles had been put over the rail and one of the pirates had attempted to board the ferry. He hadn’t got far; his body was on the deck, surrounded by a rapidly growing puddle of blood. Ruby didn’t even know the name of the guy Olga had given the rifle to, but he’d stopped at least one enemy from boarding the ship.

“They’re coming back for another try.” Said Aydin.

Ruby didn’t know where the guy with the SA80 had found to hide, but she heard him start to fire as the pirate’s patrol boat turned towards the ferry again. Far quieter than a Kalashnikov, the SA80 packed a harder punch and was far more accurate. The pirates had to move close to the ferry to get on board and that meant being lit up by the ship’s lights. Forgetting the powers her gift granted her, Ruby ran to the rail and started firing her own weapon at the patrol boat. Several of the pirates were at the front, waiting to leap onto the ladders. Ruby saw one fall into the sea and suspected it was one of her bullets that was responsible. It appeared Kallina had given her skills beyond a few memories and a little Azeri.

“I’ll push the ladders over the side.” Said Sarah.

Sarah had appeared out of nowhere, carrying a silver revolver much too big for her.

“No !” Shouted Ruby. “They’ll be useful, we’ll pull them on board once we’ve taken care of the patrol boat.”

They all began firing at the patrol boat, ignoring the bullets hitting the hull and cabins all around them. Ruby aimed short bursts into the cabin of the boat, while Aydin seemed to be firing as many bullets as he could in approximately the right direction. Sarah surprised them both, by hitting the pirate steering the vessel.

“Well done Miss Sarah.” Said Aydin.

The patrol boat hit the side of the ferry so hard, that the entire ship seemed to shudder. Then it bounced off and flew away, still no one at the wheel to control it. Ruby carried on firing, but then she put her AK47 down and lifted her right arm, pointing her fingers at the craft. As the patrol boat hit a wave, she lifted it from the water, allowing it to tip end over end, sending most of the crew into the sea. As it reached a height of about fifty feet, she simply let it go. Ruby had previously felt tired after using her gift, but now her heart wasn’t even beating fast. The patrol boat hit the water stern first and broke up. Sarah was still aiming her revolver at debris in the water.

“The pirates,” she shouted, “they’re swimming this way !”

“Leave them Sarah, we’re moving too fast for them to reach us.”

As they watched, the faces bobbing in the water began to recede into the darkness, one or two actually waving to be picked up.

“Should we.....” Started Sarah.

“NO !” Snapped Ruby.

Ruby looked at the ladders, they'd be perfect if they needed to get their kit into one of the ferry's boats. Several of the crew had come out of hiding, so Ruby got them busy pulling the ladders over the side and onto the deck.

"Stack them against the deck cabins." She said.

Sarah was grinning at her and it really did feel as though they'd defeated the infamous Iranian patrol boats. Then they heard Leo begin firing and realised they had to start fighting yet again.

"To the front of the ship !" Shouted Ruby.

"The prow." Aydin corrected as he ran beside her.

Sarah followed and two other members of the crew. They were about twenty feet from Leo, when a roaring sound made them all stop and look around. It was like the sound of someone using an aerosol can, but magnified a thousand times. Just for a few seconds the noise received everyone's attention and then the rocket appeared hurtling over the prow of the ship.

"Down, down, it's a fucking rocket !" Leo was shouting.

Ruby still wasn't quite flat on the deck when the rocket hit the bridge. She was still up on one knee and had a perfect view of it exploding into a small white hot ball of fire. The incendiary warheads for the Russian MRO-A had been cleverly designed. Some of the most powerful ingredients worked best at high temperature and now they had it. Complex chemical were injected into the ball of white heat and it expanded to become an expanding ball of fire, which completely obliterated the bridge.

Captain Jafarov, at least five of the crew, gone, evaporated away into nothing. All this happened in less than a second and Ruby was left looking at a rising cloud of red hot gas and flame. The Night Princess was an old vessel, it didn't need the bridge to operate. The engines carried on at the last setting, the rudders remained where they'd been set.

"Follow me." Ruby called to Sarah.

Sarah was still lying on the deck, so Ruby pulled her to her feet and beckoned Aydin to follow them.

"It's Max," she added, "I can feel his hate."

They reached Leo and he was still firing at the third patrol boat. Ruby noticed he had a bullet wound in his thigh, a bad one, a real bleeder. Leo had rammed half his shirt inside his trousers as a battle bandage, but the wound would need treating soon or he'd be in trouble. His fire was keeping the pirates inside the patrol boat's cabin; Ruby could see at least two bodies left on the exposed decking. Not Max though, he jumped about as though he was immune to automatic weapon fire. Ruby felt as though she could actually see Max grinning, but the boat was too far away to see his face clearly in the moonlight.

"He has nine lives," said Leo, "I've nearly hit him so many times."

Leo fired and Max moved to the side of the patrol boat to throw the useless shell of the rocket launcher over the side.

"See !" Shouted Leo. "The man is a devil."

"He's going to fire another rocket." Said Ruby.

Max picked up the second MRO-A and aimed it straight at her. There wasn't time to tell everyone to scatter and Spider had just limped up to the rail, late once again.

"I left Ali in the engine room," he said, "he actually understands how they work. What's happening here ?"

Ruby ignored him and concentrated on Max, hoping the rocket launcher he now had on his shoulder, might be faulty. Ruby held out her hand, pointing at Max with her index finger. The rocket fired perfectly and the missile left the launcher and once again the roaring sound filled the air.

"No !" Shouted Ruby.

She detonated the missile by pouring heat into it. A small white ball of light became the now familiar expanding ball of orange flame and most of it was approaching where Ruby was standing. There was no time to tell everyone to duck, there was no real cover anyway, the wall of fire was approaching too fast. She pushed it up, sending it up hundreds of feet, letting it pass harmless over the ferry once it was too high to do any damage. They were all staring, watching the flames rise and pass into the night, lighting the Night Princess up as though it was day. Once they were in darkness again, Ruby looked over the prow and the patrol boat was very close and they were obviously going to run into it. There was nothing left of the cabin, the exploding missile had levelled everything and set the hull itself on fire.

"They're finished, we've won." Said Leo.

Leo, of course, there was no time to enjoy their victory. It would have been tempting to use Aydin to organise the crew, but Ruby knew that she had to start showing Sarah a little faith in her abilities.

"Aydin," she said, "the medical kit is in our cabin, please bring it here, we need to treat the wound in Leo's leg."

Spider was leaning on the rail, watching as the Night Princess hit the hull of the patrol boat and sent it spinning into the night.

"Spider." He turned to look at her.

"You seem to get on with Ali. See if he can slow us down. It looks like we're going to run into the dunes along the coast and I'd prefer not to do it at our current speed."

"Will do." He replied.

She watched him limp across the deck, moving much faster than when he'd arrived. At that moment she knew Spider would be well enough to cross the desert with her. The old team were all going to get to Oboy, unless fate had yet more surprises for them.

"Sarah."

"Yes Ruby?"

"Don't fuck this up."

"I won't."

Sarah was grinning at her and looking ready for anything.

"Find Yas if you can and organise the crew to get one of the inflatable boats ready. Then we'll need the ladders the pirates so graciously gave us. Get them brought down to the front of the ferry."

"The prow." Corrected Yas.

He looked a little charred and his T shirt had a nasty burned area, but otherwise he looked fine.

"As Yas says, the prow. Then get all our people and their kit to the front..... the prow and then check that we've left nothing behind. Did you get all that?"

"Yes, no problem. I'll get it done I promise."

"I'll help her." Said Yas.

Ruby pointed into the distance and the coastline could just be made out in the moonlight. Miles of dunes and sand bars that now filled the horizon in the direction they were heading.

"Hurry," said Ruby, "I think we'll run aground in less than half an hour."

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The settlement at Oboy had obviously once been immense. Old stone walls and bits of what had once been buildings, littered the desert far into the distance. It looked prehistoric, 'almost biblical' came into George's mind.

"This was a major city once." He said.

"It's just a one horse town now." Said Terry.

“And I bet the horse is sick.” Added a not-Terry.

George put the rifle he’d been given against the wall and added the pack he’d been carrying. It was all Eric’s kit, but George knew he’d probably appreciate the extra food and water once the sun came up.

“Spread out,” said Sarge, “find your own wall to get behind, just stay within shouting distance.”

It had been a tough two miles that had felt more like four or five because of the rough terrain. In winter the desert didn’t get that hot, especially at night. George felt thankful that Ruby hadn’t decided to search for Kurt in August.

“Three houses and about a dozen yurts.” Said Terry.

He then handed the night glasses to George. Only the best for his team, the image intensifier binoculars had cost a lot of money. They also had infra-red night sites and something experimental that worked a bit like an MRI. With moonlight though, the image intensifier was more than adequate. George focused the binoculars and saw the settlement as clear as day. He saw the three buildings, one actually had a second storey. Around the buildings and fairly spread out were about a dozen yurts, the portable, round tent covered with skins or felt used as a dwelling by nomads. Two of them had very modern additions.

“I see two satellite dishes.” He said.

“It means nothing,” said Terry, “I once went to a village in Siberia, right on the worst of the permafrost. The villagers lived or died on whether their few sickly looking animals survived the winter. They had a small generator and a satellite dish. Everyone wants their smartphone to work Sir and their kids want to play Candy Crush over the internet.”

George carried on looking at the settlement and it looked shut down for the night. They were close enough to have heard a small generator, yet there was complete silence. George decided that the local kids had finished playing on the internet for the night.

“Now we wait.” Said George.

His eyes must have closed for a while, but it was still dark when Terry gently shook him.

“Sir, sorry to wake you.”

“What’s the problem ?”

Terry let him get properly awake and then handed him the glasses and pointed to some lights in the distance and what looked to be something on fire. George could see the Ferry quite clearly, part of its superstructure on fire and there were other smaller fires on the deck area. It was still moving and he could just make out people moving around at the prow end.

“The explosion happened a few minutes ago,” said Terry, “I’m assuming this is the target on her way here.”

“Not target Terry, her name is Ruby.”

As he watched there was a flash of bright white light and then a wall of flame that rose over the ship, lighting it up so well that he could read the name ‘Night Princess,’ with the binoculars. People were still impossible to make out in detail, but he hoped one of them was Ruby. Sarge appeared out the night and sat on the sand near George.

“Do we go to help them ?” He asked.

George watched until he was certain the ferry was still moving, still heading for the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea. Then he gave the glasses back to Terry and answered Sarge.

“We stick to the plan and wait for them to come to us.”

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By the time Joy noticed the burning ferry on the screens, Jennifer was suggesting it was something worth investigating. No one had ever allowed a surveillance drone to be autonomous, though they were capable of running the entire mission. It was all a bit too 'Skynet' for the general population, so someone like Joy, a human, always had to give final approval. Not that she knew the heat sources were a burning ferry, at least not yet.

"What have you got?" Asked Bob.

It was his job to monitor her and up to five other operators, so she didn't resent him popping up behind her, though it could be irritating. He was a good lover, but Joy had invested a lot of years in her marriage, so she'd be dumping Bob as soon as her transfer came through.

"Heat source ahead of Jennifer," she said, "I'm giving her the go ahead to investigate."

"Good, is she ok for fuel."

"Yes, they fitted the long range tanks."

Bob briefly touched her shoulder and walked away. Sex in the back of her car with Bob has once been the highlight of her week, now she was thinking of excuses to avoid it. Her or him? Joy had to be honest with herself and admit to being very fickle. She gave Jennifer permission to investigate the heat source and watched her screen as the drone turned a little and speeded up. It was almost as if Jennifer was excited at what she might find, even though Joy knew it was all part of her AI.

"Go get em girl." Joy muttered to herself.

Jennifer could carry hellfire missiles, but today she'd been fitted with extra fuel tanks. Joy felt pride at just how fuel efficient Jennifer was, she'd be able to look for the terrorists for several more hours. Everything Jennifer saw through her cameras and sensors was fed to a mainframe somewhere, a super computer that could give additional information and suggestions.

"That's interesting." Said Bob.

He was back again and Joy wondered what she'd ever seen in him. On her screen, the super computer was identifying the fires as likely to be a burning ferry. Vessel weight, age, identity of owners and captain, were all being scrolled up the edge of her screen. The Night Princess, on her way from Baku to Turkmenbashi and already several hours late.

"It'll be dawn by the time Jennifer gets there," said Joy, "we'll get a good view of the Night Princess and what's happened to her."

"Good, shout if you need me."

Bob was gone again and Joy tried to find a passenger list for the ferry, but of course it hadn't been filed with the authorities. Joy reached into her drawer and found a plastic container with several homemade flapjacks in it. Joy was patient, she'd eat her flapjack and wait for Jennifer to reach her target.

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Ruby was at the prow of the ferry, all her friends and their gear with her. Their kit bags had already been secured to the rail with the toughest rope they could find. The plastic water bottles wrapped in sacking and wedged tightly into corners. Leo still worried her, but there was no plan B now, soon they'd have to leave the ferry. The Night Princess was effectively out of control and all Ali had been able to do was decrease their speed a little.

"I can kill the engines completely if you want?" He'd asked.

"No, if we lose power, she'll just drift with the tides." Serge had said.

"We'll be in the dark," added Aydin, "the engines generate our power."

Ruby had decided to leave the engines running and the dunes along the coast seemed to be hurtling towards them. The crew had thrown many loose items overboard, but the deck still seemed covered

in heavy oil drums and pieces of equipment. They'd all become lethal if the vessel hit the coast and came to a complete stop. Ruby had her gift, but stopping the momentum of dozens of heavy objects was beyond even her skills. Serge and Aydin had decided on the best part of the rail for them to be tied to, the deck cabins should screen them from most loose objects.

"What about the passengers?" Asked Olga.

"They've all been told to prepare for the ferry running aground." Said Ruby.

"They're all crazy." Added Aydin.

He twiddled his finger against the side of his head, in the internationally accepted way to indicate that someone was insane. The passengers hadn't gone to secure places and most of them seemed to be aimlessly running around the deck. Ruby put ropes around Leo's body and tied him to the rail; Serge helping her gets the ropes nice and tight. Next they tied down Spider and then the more able bodied of their friends. Aydin tightened the knots on Ruby and Serge and when was happy that they were all well secured, he ran to get to his bunk, which he considered one of the safest parts of the ship.

"My bunk is in a tiny room, no space to bounce about." He'd told them.

The two guys scouting for a motor rally saw them and obviously decided it was a good idea. They picked up the spare rope Serge had left behind and quickly tied themselves to the rail a few yards away.

"Didn't they do this on old sailing ships? Lashing people down I mean." Asked Spider.

"During hurricanes I think." Answered Serge.

It might have been better if it had been completely dark, the moon was showing a sand bar far too clearly. The ferry was travelling at speed and the first sand bar didn't seem to slow it down at all.

There was a loud scratching sound and then they saw one of the passenger fall over and crash into a cabin wall.

"Stay down and hold onto something!" Shouted Leo.

It was one of the students and he didn't listen. He stood up and ran towards the back of the vessel. Ruby was expecting reed beds or something similar, something to slow them down a little. In front of them though were more sand bars and then the vast dunes that ran along the coast.

"I'm scared." Said Sarah.

"We'll be fine." Said Spider.

"I feel so helpless," said Sarah, "tied here, supposing the ferry sinks."

"There's not enough depth here for it to sink." Said Olga.

There was a few seconds of silence, but Ruby could tell Sarah was working herself up into a full panic attack.

"I heard you can drown in just two inches of water." Said Sarah.

Ruby badly wanted to tell her to shut the fuck up, tell her they were all scared. Instead she grinned at her best friends and gave her a wink.

"Sorry." Said Sarah.

"No problem."

Then they hit a harder and higher sand bar and the passengers started screaming. There was the unmistakable sound of ropes breaking and barrels rolling around. The worst thing was seeing a passenger knocked across the deck and then overboard by a heavy packing case. Sarah began screaming and Ruby told her to close her eyes.

"It'll be over soon." Said Ruby.

"That's what I'm afraid of!"

When they hit the coast the front of the ship stopped and the stern didn't. The sound of tortured metal filled the air as the prow buckled and twisted and the entire vessel leant over to the port side. Ruby was pulled against the ropes so tightly that she thought her arms would be pulled out of their sockets. Her head hit the rail, but she wasn't given the mercy of unconsciousness. Through foggy vision she saw one of the crew crushed against the rail by a portable generator. Ruby thought she'd become used to death, but she recognised the crew member as Yas, just before his crushed body vanished overboard. She cried and was still crying when Serge came to cut her free of the ropes. "It's ok Ruby," he said, "we're all safe and none of our kits has been damaged."  
"But..... Yas died."

Sarah was helping her up and brushing her hair away from the side of her head.

"That's a nasty bump, sit down and let us get everything sorted out." Said Sarah.

She let Sarah sit her on a packing case that had tumbled over and then Olga was using surgical spirit to clean the gash on her head. Ruby realised it wasn't the whole ferry that had leant over, just the prow as it had twisted away from the rest of the ship. Whole sections of the deck cabins had fallen apart or moved across the deck and one of the chimneys was now leaning over at an alarming angle. "Thank you." She said to Olga.

"You have to get there Ruby and in one piece."

Aydin appeared, bruised and limping, but still smiling the instant her saw Ruby. He seemed to feel the need to give a report.

"No major fires and only four of the crew are seriously wounded. Captain Jafarov is dead of course and ten of the crew are missing, presumed dead." He said.

"I'd love to stay and help, but....."

"I know, you need to be on your way. You need to leave Ruby, a lot of people will be looking for the Night Princes, we're already very late for our arrival at Turkmenbashi."

She stood and the deck seemed to move around all on its own. Ruby grabbed hold of Olga and concentrated on keeping upright.

"I'll be fine." She replied to a question no one had asked.

Olga one side and Sarah the other, they helped her over to where Spider and Leo were limping about and trying to get their new ladders over the side.

"We've become an army of the walking wounded." Said Ruby.

Serge had his head over the rail and was directing their efforts, it seemed the ladders would almost reach the desert surface. The ferry shuddered and there were more sounds of tortured rivets, as the huge vessel settled further into the sand. Ruby could see the ferry had come a long way out of the Caspian Sea, only the rear third was now in the water.

"She's broken her back," said Serge, "they'll leave her here. Anything worth stealing will be stripped out and then the Night Princess will become just another rusting wreck."

The ladders were over the side and hanging at about twenty degrees away from the hull. It would be an awkward climb, but the ladders ended a mere eighteen inches or so from the dry sand of the desert. Ruby was beginning to recover from the blow on the head and felt the need to reassert her role as leader.

"This will be the first time we've had to walk any distance, so keep what you take to a minimum. You'll have to carry or drag what you bring."

"This is all we have," said Spider, "everything else was in the cabin."

Ruby looked around and there was a bag of weapons, enough for one each and some back packs with a few essentials. Olga had packed a change of clothing for each of them and a little water, that

was it. Ruby looked towards the rear of the ferry and the smouldering bridge and the hole where their cabin had been, right below the bridge.

“All our new clothes Sarah, all our lovely new clothes.”

Sarah held her hand.

“We can buy more when we get back to London.” Replied Sarah.

Spider was first down the ladder, falling the last six feet, but coming to no harm.

“It’s alright, he landed on something soft.....His head.” Joked Sarah.

Leo was helped down by Olga and then Serge helped Sarah down to the bottom. Ruby gave the ferry a last look over and then she climbed down the ladder and stood with her five friends.

“It wasn’t exactly home,” she said, “but I’m sad that the Night Princess will never move again.”

“I think we killed it.” Added Sarah.

From below the ferry looked immense, like a huge sea monster trying to climb out of the water.

Ruby picked up her rifle and her pack and put her arm through Spider’s.

“No rush,” she said, “Spider can set the pace. I don’t want to arrive at Oboy until after sunrise.”

Loaded down with back packs and weapons they trudged across the sand and into the darkness of the desert.

“I heard people just walk around in circles in the dark.” Said Sarah.

“Only if they don’t know where they’re going.” Answered Ruby.

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Max knew he should have been dead, he wasn’t even wearing a life jacket. It was light when his eyes opened, it looked to be not long after dawn, there was still a slight haziness. His face was in the damp sand and he felt cold. For a while, just lifting his head off the sand was enough effort and then he tried an experimental look around. He hurt, everything seemed to hurt, especially the back of his head. His legs were still in the water, so he raised himself up on his arms and then pulled his knees up. At that point he realised how much his back had been damaged, just moving a few muscles had him gasping for breath and fighting the urge to scream. There were four men sat on the ground only twenty feet away, crouched over a fire made of driftwood. One he recognised from his own patrol boat, but the other three were unknown to him.

“الوحيد الناجين ونحن”, “Are we the only survivors ?” He called.

One of them ignored him completely, but the other three turned and glared at him. One actually picked up his rifle, but then all of them turned back to gazing at their fire. Max hadn’t expected a warm welcome; they had left him lying in the water after all. But they hadn’t killed him, which he chose to view as a plus. He managed to get up on his feet and checked himself over. No obvious wounds, Max thought he’d got away from the battle fairly unscathed, until he felt his head.

“Crap ! I’m bald.” He muttered.

Again the faces at the fire gave him a long and unpleasant gaze and then ignored him. He had a few tufts of hair, but most of it had been burned off his head and his fingers caused agony if he tried to touch the back of his head. He remembered turning as the rocket had exploded. There had been pain as he felt his back burning and then he’d passed out. Max put his hand under his burnt shirt and felt his back, causing him to cry out and get another withering look for the surviving pirates. The nerve endings had been burned, but Max knew he was in for a lot of pain once he began to heal. He carefully turned, half expecting to see the ferry, on fire in the Caspian Sea. Instead he just saw miles of empty ocean, the Night Princess had obviously carried on moving after the attack. The shore though was full of debris from their patrol boats and bodies, several bodies. He had nothing on him, apart from his burned clothes, so Max’s first instinct was to loot the dead. He found a decent knife



on one and a pistol on another. On lifting one body, he found an AR16 with a full clip. It had been in the water and would need a good clean, but just holding it improved his mood. No food though, no water bottles. Max looked south to where he was certain the Ferry would be, probably aground and full of the things he needed. He could have probably seen it if the dunes weren't in the way. Not yet though, the ferry could wait, he was going after Ruby.

"We need to get moving." He said to the four at the fire.

One man turned and looked at him, the one Max recognised from his own boat.

"Where to Max ? We have no water and it's a long way along the coast to Turkmenbashi. We're dead men Max, you killed us, just sit down and let us die in peace."

He could have told them about the ferry, but he wanted them to think the settlement at Oboy was their only hope. Max pointed in the direction he believed was about right.

"There is a settlement over there, not far away. We can easily walk there in a few hours and there will be water, food and probably a way to contact someone to pick us up."

The man who'd never looked at him now turned towards him and Max winced as he saw the terrible wound the man had on his face. The jaw bone was exposed and his left eye was bloody and useless.

"My God has brought me to this place Max, it is his will that I am here and if I am to die here, then so be it. You wouldn't understand these things, but I am happy to die here if my God wills it."

Max decided to give him his wish and fired a short burst from the AR16, straight into the man's back. Max was actually surprised that the weapon had worked so well, after a night on a wet, sandy beach. The others went to pick up their rifles, but Max fired another burst into the fire and they remained still.

"We're going to the settlement," he said, "anyone who thinks their God wants them to stay here, can join their friend in the afterlife. Anyone want to join him ?"

They were glaring at him, but there was no answer to his question.

"Good. Ok, get up and keep in front of me."

They picked up their weapons and seemed resigned to going with him. Max suspected that he'd just removed the proverbial bad apple from the barrel.

"Which direction Max ?"

Max had to guess, but he had a good idea where the ferry would be and Oboy was due east of that point. He knew how to cross open ground, you pick a landmark and go to it and then pick another landmark. Do it right and you can walk for miles in something approaching a straight line. There was a line of bright red sand in about the right direction, so Max pointed at it.

"That way."

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Ruby was used to her gift manifesting itself in odd ways. She wasn't surprised when she began to see the ruins of a great city and her gift showed her the city in all its former glory. Karakum, last great city of the Das Geheimnis. Now only the name of a vast desert, even the local population had forgotten the city had ever existed and who had been its inhabitants. Black Sand was the meaning the Turks had given to Karakum, but Ruby knew it had a much earlier meaning. The people of the Black Sand had been the Das Geheimnis, the people she now thought of as her own ancestors.

"Is there a problem Ruby ?" Spider asked.

The sun had recently come up and if anything, her visions of a vast and wonderful city had intensified.

"Sorry what was that ?" She asked

"It's just that we've been stood here for quite a while now."

They were still a good two miles from Oboy and her small group looked very tired. Leo had a patch of blood on his trousers, which meant that his wound needed treating and Spider had begun to lean on her quite heavily.

"We'll rest here for a while." She said.

"Thank you, I thought we'd never get a rest." Said Sarah.

While they rested, Olga redressed Leo's wound without being asked. Ruby carried on looking East, towards Oboy, which was like a compass needle in her head. Only now something else was calling to her, a point a little more north east. It almost glowed, like a sunbeam on a cloudy day. It was Leo who first noticed the drone.

"What's that?" He said pointing into the sky.

Back the way they'd come he was pointing, almost directly towards where the Night Princess would be. There was no sound, but Ruby saw the occasional flash as something reflected the sun light.

"It'll be a drone looking for us." Said Serge.

Olga stared at the approaching object for a good minute, before offering an opinion.

"It'll be the Americans." She said.

"Why the Americans?" Asked Sarah.

"Only they can afford such toys."

It was definitely looking for them, at one point it headed away and then moved back onto a course to bring it directly over them.

"Can we hide?" Asked Sarah.

"No," said Serge, "it will have already seen us and will just be coming for a closer look."

Ruby felt almost violated by the approaching robot in the sky. How dare it look at her, how dare it follow her, how dare it! She moved her hand as though she was slapping someone and the drone became a pile of debris in the sky. For a brief second its fuel became a ball of fire and then the drone was nothing but a cloud of tiny pieces, falling onto the desert.

"Well done Ruby!" Shouted Sarah, laughing.

They were all cheering and grinning at her, they'd needed an easy victory, one where no one actually had to die.

"Well done Ruby," said Olga, "you've just cost the American taxpayer at least twenty million dollars."

"It'll have sent our location to its base." Said Spider.

"And then they'll work out where we're going." Added Serge.

"No they won't, we're going there." Said Ruby.

She was pointing towards whatever was calling her in ancient Karakum. They all looked shocked, Sarah looked particularly despondent.

"Don't worry," said Ruby, "it's not much further than where we were going."

Ruby once again held onto Spiders arm and walked across the desert, the others following behind them.

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Joy had been pleased when Jennifer had found the stricken ferry. The Caspian Sea was an area of the world in dispute, everyone seemed to be claiming a part of it. An American drone wouldn't help matters, so an anonymous tip to a friendly government and the survivors on the Night Princess would be rescued. Daylight made things much easier and Jennifer quickly found the tracks of a group heading east and into the desert. It had to be the terrorists, though Joy had no idea why they were walking into one of the most isolated places on the planet.

"Got their position yet?" Asked Bob.

Joy badly wanted to be sarcastic, but that would get onto her file. Sarcasm was a sign of a bad attitude, at least it was to the air force. Once she had her transfer, she might just call Bob one night and tell him what she really thought of him.

"I have six people on infra-red," she said, "definitely our target group."

"Closer, the guys upstairs want a photo."

The guys upstairs meant the CIA of course.

"A few more seconds and Jennifer will be right on top of them." Said Joy.

Jennifer rotated her best HD camera into position and waited to get in just the right position. Then she became just a pile of very expensive dust, as twenty eight million dollars worth of state of the art drone, became a few thousand tiny fragments.

"Have you lost her?" Asked Bob.

"No, she's gone."

Joy's heart was beating fast, she hated losing a drone like that. They all had a limited lifespan, but having one killed in flight..... it was like losing a member of her family.

"What do you mean gone?"

"For fuck sake Bob, someone blew her up. Most likely cause is a ground to air missile. A very good one, Jennifer didn't pick up any weapons lock on her."

The six on the ground hadn't been carrying much, nothing sophisticated enough to take out Jennifer. Joy was confused and upset and she was worried about the obscenity getting on her staff file.

"Sorry Bob, I'm just upset about Jennifer."

He put his hand on her shoulder and gently kissed the top of her head.

"I understand Joy, no problem. I'll report it to the guys upstairs as a drone brought down by missile attack."

Bob did just that and the threat level for Ruby and her friends was moved up a few levels. The guys upstairs authorised the use of lethal force to neutralise that threat.

~ ~

They'd gone past miles of ruins and when Ruby finally stood in front of where she'd been heading, it looked very unimpressive. True it was the only building they'd seen that was in anyway intact, but it was just four walls, four windows and a doorway blocked by tons of sand. Ruby had often felt envious of her college friends, the ones who talked of the thrill of returning home. Ruby had never felt that, ever. Not for her the warm glow of seeing a house in the distance and thinking of it as home. A few times, when she was on a jet landing at Heathrow, there had been a brief thrill, but nothing like the thrill others felt. Now she felt it. In front of the ruined building, in the ruins of ancient Karakum, ruby realised she was home. Even the few bits of scrub, growing in the damp patch by the doorway, didn't put her off.

"I'm home!" She shouted.

"This is it? We're there?" Asked Sarah.

Sarah was giving her most scornful look, but Ruby didn't care.

"Do we need to dig the doorway out?" Asked Serge. "If we do it'll take a few hours."

Karakum was all around her in all its beauty. Ruby could see it so clearly that it interfered with her seeing the ruins. She was impatient and wanted to simply enter the archway and go through into the fabulous building beyond. This was the most wonderful building in the most advanced and powerful city that had ever existed on earth, or was ever likely to. Ruby imagined archaeologists visiting the ruins and finding the discovery of a lifetime, but she knew it was unlikely that any would come to the

dangerous desert east of the Caspian. Now she could see people in bright clothing, the people of the Black Sand, her people, but not people like her friends, people like.....

“The doorway Ruby,” said Olga, “do we dig it out ?”

Ruby walked over to the nearest window.

“No, the window will do fine. Someone help me up.”

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