

Ruby

Chapter 13 – Baku

“In Serbia they called her Baba Korizma, In Croatia mothers used Baba Roga as a threat to make unruly children behave.”

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The local Romanian police had heard rumours about an attempted extortion going wrong; they normally tried to keep out of those kinds of problems. The bandits rarely welcomed the police into their villages and so what if a few bandits were killed? Romania was desperate to increase tourism and ambushing travellers on lonely roads was hardly likely to improve the country's image. On this occasion though the local police officer, the only police presence for a hundred square miles, had been asked to attend by the village elder. The new elder it seemed, the old one had been one of the fatalities at the attempted holdup. The local officer had found the scene of a major battle and a body that didn't seem to fit the usual pattern. He'd called Bucharest for help and Emil found himself looking at a badly decayed body by the roadside.

“You could have at least moved her.” He said.

The local man looked awkward and Emil noticed his uniform was a bit grubby and the man badly needed a shave.

“The nearest mortuary is eighty miles away,” he said, “and I could hardly use the freezer at the abattoir, it wouldn't be sanitary.”

“Still, you could have put her in a body bag and stored the body somewhere. The birds have already taken the eyes. Shame really, she must have been a pretty young girl.”

“I'm sorry sir.”

Emil decided that as the body had been picked over by hungry wildlife, he was hardly going to ruin any evidence on the body. He pulled the thin dress to one side and the cause of death was fairly obvious.

“Who had the Uzi?” He asked.

“The village elder, the one who's dead.”

One bullet had nicked her arm and then three had done the job of killing her. One in each lung and another in the heart. Emil looked up and saw where the burst of fire had split the bark of the tree behind the body.

“She only looks to be about twenty or so, what the hell went on here?”

The officer was looking at the pile of twisted metal which had been pushed to the side of the road.

“It was bad sir, someone used an RPG and I don't think it was the villagers.”

Something was nagging at Emil's mind, something he'd seen recently. There were always dozens of office memos and alerts, far too many to examine properly. Something about a pretty young western girl and her heavily armed friends.

“Did she have anything on her?” He asked.

“No, just the clothes she's wearing Sir.”

Emil turned her over, disturbing a small lizard that was hunting the insects drawn to the corpse.

“There are some body bags in the trunk of my car. Get one, I'm taking her with me.”

The local officer muttered an acknowledgement and walked off in the direction of the BMW series 3 that Emil had arrived in. The car was quite old, but any BMW was viewed as impressive in the police

force. Emil stood up and looked into the woods, that was where she'd come from, everything pointed that way.

"Who were you?" He muttered at the body.

A few yards into the trees he found an expensive looking Gucci bag. The local officer should have found it, his negligence would have to go in the official report. Add his slovenly appearance and leaving the body uncovered for days and the man would probably be reprimanded and fined. In an ideal world he'd be sacked and replaced, but few wanted to police the bandit country near the Bulgarian border. He opened the bag and found a few hundred euros, a wallet and a passport.

"You've found something then?"

The man was unfolding the body bag and putting it on the ground next to the body.

"Yes, something you should have found two days ago."

"Sorry sir."

The passport was for a pretty twenty two year old Canadian girl, a Zoe Chapman from Vancouver. He held the picture up to the body and there were still points of similarity, despite the actions of hungry birds and insects. The height was right too, the body definitely seemed to be that of Zoe Chapman.

The wallet contained three credit cards, all in the same name and all from well-known banks.

"She's a Canadian. You should have bagged her up on the day you found her, this doesn't look good."

"Sorry sir."

Emil smiled, he's just remembered the alert and the picture at the top of it. The girl in the photo wasn't Zoe, that was obviously a fake id, probably one of many. The battle, the RPG, the obvious victory of her friends. Why had they left her behind for the birds to feed on though? He actually grinned at the local officer.

"This may make us both famous. This, I believe is the body of Ruby Mason."

"The terrorist?"

Emil knelt down on the ground beside the body and began to carefully move it into the thick black body bag.

"The very one, though I'm surprised her friends left her here. Help me, I want to take her body back to Bucharest tonight."

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Leo pulled an AK47 assault rifle from the bag in the back of the estate car and noticed the magazine was at an odd angle. Something had been damaged, but there were several spares. Leo had noticed that Olga had quite a few faults, but not providing enough weapons obviously wasn't one of them. He noticed a British army SA80 among the pile and quickly checked it over. By the time he'd made sure it was battle ready, the others had disappeared into the darkness. He could see the lane leading back to the road in the moonlight, but decided there was just enough light to cut through the woods and make straight for where the house was supposed to be. The trees were spaced out in most places and he made good time in reaching the rear fence of the house. Leo gasped and then he recognised the creature who had her finger to her lips and was glaring at him.

"There is a gap in the fence to your right." Kallina whispered.

Only it wasn't Kallina now, it was the hideous Baba Yaga and she was hovering a good two feet from the ground. Her eyes glowed red and she had Constanze on her arm, despite Leo remembering the cat being left behind. For a moment he was rooted to the spot, held there by the apparition in front of him, but then he ran to the hole in the fence and climbed through.

"Hurry child." He heard Baba Yaga call out to him.

Through the hole was a neglected garden with overgrown bushes and shrubs. Leo could just see the light from a window through the branches of a holly bush. He ignored the scratches to his face and pushed through, coming out onto what had once been a lawn, that was now gone to seed. He ran and didn't see the old lawn rake until he fell over it and landed in a heap about ten feet from the house.

"Idiot." He muttered to himself.

He ran to the house and the window to his left shattered and automatic fire went over his head and into the garden. Leo lifted the SA80 and controlled his breathing, bringing up the gunsight and looking at the window. An arm and a shoulder appeared and there was another burst of fire, this time coming closer to where he was crouched. He'd been in similar situations, so Leo kept his aim on the window after the shoulder had disappeared back inside. There was the bark of at least two AK47s coming from the front of the house now, but Leo stayed put and kept his eye on the window. A few seconds later and the gun barrel appeared, then the shoulder and finally a neck, as the man inside tried to strafe the garden close to the window. Leo squeezed and then let go of the trigger, sending no more than three bullets at the man. He saw a brief explosion of red in the gunsight, blood as the 5.56 mm bullet ripped into the man's neck. Leo lowered the rifle and heard the man screaming. It didn't worry him, hopefully one or two of his friends might come to help him, taking them out of the action. Leo had once emptied a room full of fighters, all of whom had come to tend a wounded colleague. That was in a different war and a different place, but Leo remembered the experience and he'd learned from it.

"ублюдок !" He heard someone shout.

Leo smiled, his Russian wasn't that good, but it appeared he'd annoyed someone enough for them to question his parentage. He leaned close to the shattered window and saw a wounded man holding his bloody neck and still screaming. A shadow appeared from the other side of the room, another soldier who'd been taught how to move smoothly and silently. He knelt next to the man on the ground and pulled a trauma pack from a bag.

"тихий." Said the soldier, trying to quiet his friend.

Leo fired a quick burst through the window, before stepping over the sill and into the room. He crouched, looking over the two dead bodies, watching the doorway. At least half a dozen automatic weapons were now firing at the front of the house and there was a strange whirring sound, as if a hurricane was approaching. Leo ignored it all and watched the door for a count of ten. Satisfied that no one was about to rush in on him, he stood up and walked through the doorway and into the corridor. The front door was open and a yellow flickering light was lighting up the hallway, obviously something was on fire at the front of the house. Leo moved to the other side of the corridor and looked through the open door to the lounge. The body of a large man was draped over a comfortable looking leather chair, his weapon still gripped in his dead right hand. Leo heard Ruby shouting outside;

"Down Sarah ! Keep behind the wall !"

Leo approached the lounge door and slowly looked in, crouching low as he did so. There were two men looking out of the shattered front windows, one of them was raising an assault rifle to his shoulder. Leo wasn't going to issue a warning, people only did that in films and even in films it often cost them their lives. He lifted the SA80 and began to press the trigger. Carlos beat him to it, coming through the other door from the kitchen and shooting both men before Leo had the chance. Carlos swung his weapon, but recognised Leo and lowered it.

"I heard them shout that some bastard was at the back. I should have known." Said Carlos.

They grinned at each other and Leo watched as Carlos' face vanished. Several bullets hit his jaw and forehead until there was no face left at all. It had all happened in less than a second. As the body of Carlos hit the ground, Leo turned and fired a short burst into his attacker. Outside the sound like a hurricane grew stronger and he could hear screaming.

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"Use your initiative Ruby." Said Kallina.

Then she vanished from in front of Ruby. It was far better than the best special effect she'd seen in any film. One second Kallina was there and the next she was gone. No swirl of smoke, no gradual fading, no crash of thunder, she just vanished.

"Everyone armed?"

They all nodded at her or held up a strange assortment of old and new weapons. All except Leo who seemed to be having trouble deciding on a weapon. Never mind, he was a veteran of umpteen wars and would easily catch up with them.

"We'll follow the lane back to the main road." Said Ruby.

She ran the hundred yards or so back to the road and looked left, seeing a porch light outside the house Kallina had said they were attacking. The house looked so ordinary, it all felt so strange. Could she simply lead her rag tag army against someone's house? People who might be an ordinary Georgian family who were watching TV. Kallina could be very eccentric after all.

"We should spread out," said Spider, "they're bound to have someone watching the road."

Ruby forgot her doubts, Kallina had told her to use her initiative and Kurt had told her to be strong.

"Serge, take Olga and Carlos across the road. Move up on the house from the other side of the road and fire as soon as you're certain you have a target."

Carlos was giving her the stink eye, but he followed Serge and Ruby watched as they silently crossed the road and went into the trees on the other side. Ruby looked at Sarah and Spider and gave them what she hoped was her most reassuring smile.

"That leaves us," she said, "Spider in front and Sarah and I will follow close behind."

The public idea of the military is created by Hollywood and is one of precision, infallibility and professional warriors, trained to be perfect fighters. Every soldier knows that war is barely organised chaos, which gets worse once the gunfire begins. Spider had only taken about five steps before he almost fell over a man kneeling behind an old oil drum. He had an AK47 propped on top of the drum and only seemed to wake up as Spider almost trod on him.

"I'm sorry Marco. I'm not asleep! When do you think they....."

His voice trailed off as realisation dawned. It wasn't Marco who'd come to check on him, the people within a foot of him were the group he was supposed to help kill. The man started to reach for his weapon, but Spider fired at him before he had the chance.

"Did you have to shoot him in the head?" Asked Sarah.

"They're probably all wearing Kevlar." Answered Spider.

He motioned them both to duck and someone from the house started firing in their direction. Ruby heard the bullets hitting the trees behind her and went down on to her belly, crawling towards the wall around the front garden.

"Down Sarah! Keep behind the wall!" She shouted.

Ruby was wearing jeans, but Sarah had insisted on wearing a ridiculously short skirt. She watched as Sarah crawled over the rocky ground and understood why she winced at every movement. Ruby saw Carlos run across the road, followed by Olga, both firing straight at the front of the house. Serge appeared a bit further up the road, throwing a grenade at a car parked in front of the house.

“Down Spider,” she said, “Serge threw a grenade.”

Spider leant across her, covering most of her body.

“I saw him, bloody fool. He doesn’t know where everyone else is.”

They heard the explosion and as Ruby looked up she saw a car on fire and Carlos running into the house. Serge was sat on the front wall, his rifle ready in case anyone ran outside. Spider waved at Serge and let Ruby get to her feet only after he’d seen Serge wave back. Sarah took a while to stand up and began to use her hands to wipe the grit from her bloody knees.

“Where’s Olga ?” Spider asked Serge.

“She went round the side of the house.”

Leo made them all jump, coming out of the front door, his jacket covered in blood.

“Are you ok ?” Asked Ruby.

He seemed to notice the blood for the first time.

“I’m fine, the blood isn’t mine.”

Ruby felt something coming. It was like the feeling on a hot summer’s days, when that little bit of darkness starts. The air starts to get that certain smell and you just know a storm is on the way. Ruby knew with absolute certainty that something far more destructive than her small army was on the way to Khulo.

“You hear that ?” Serge asked.

“Yeah.” Answered Spider.

There was no warning that Olga had encountered trouble, she just reappeared from the side of the house. A man a good deal taller than her had an arm round her neck and a large knife at her throat. The man was limping and the other man trying to hide behind Olga, also seemed to be favouring one leg. It seemed Olga had given them quite a fight before being over powered.

“Drop your weapons or she dies.”

Serge looked at Spider and they both laughed.

“Does anyone ever fall for that ?” Asked Serge

“Only fools.” Said Ruby.

“I mean it !”

He rubbed the edge of his blade against her neck, just enough to produce a light flow of blood. Olga didn’t react and Ruby felt no fear in her mind. Ruby could feel all their minds and they were all waiting for her to decide the outcome of the situation.

“Let her go and you can walk away from this,” said Ruby, “you have my word.”

The man hiding behind Olga pointed the barrel of a rifle at Ruby and spoke for the first time.

“We tell you what to do ! Drop the keys to your car and then put down your weapons.”

They had two other surviving friends, both on the upper floor of the house. Ruby could sense them and she knew one was watching, waiting to see how things went. He had a sniper rifle, but he wanted to live, so he waited and watched. Ruby wasn’t sure if her gift would work on several different targets, but she knew there was no alternative, she had to take the risk.

“I’m really sorry.” Said Ruby.

She froze the two men in place, without really understanding how she was doing it. Then came the part of the gift she did know, the ability to destroy. It didn’t come unbidden, Ruby wanted to hurt the men who’d intended to kill them, she wanted to leave an example for any others who might try to do the same. There was no wind this time, she looked at the man’s arm and burned away the skin, then the flesh and as that was still burning, she turned the bones of his hand to powder. He couldn’t scream, she was holding his chest muscles in an unseen grip that was too tight. His eyes though

wanted to scream and they never left Ruby. As his arm disintegrated, Olga fell to the ground, gasping for air and crawling towards Ruby.

“You now.”

She dropped the man who'd been holding Olga, simply released her hold on him and let him crash to the ground. The stubs below his elbows where his forearms had been were cauterised, he wouldn't die. He'd never point a rifle at anyone else though. Ruby boiled the blood in the hands of the second man, his assault rifle falling to the ground. She did less damage, she was learning. With luck and a bit of decent healthcare, he could have a prosthetic hand fitted in no time. As she let him fall to the ground, Ruby knew her gamble wasn't going to work.

“Ruby, there's one upstairs !” Shouted Sarah.

There wasn't one upstairs, there were two and Ruby knew exactly what they were doing. One was smashing the window and aiming a very accurate sniper rifle at her. The second had decided to join the battle and was taking aim at her from another window. Spider had seen the first man and was raising his AK47, but he was going to be too late. Ruby saw it almost in slow motion. Serge and Spider were both going to fire at the man with the sniper rifle, but they would be too slow, he'd have put a bullet in her head by the time they fired.

Ruby turned and tried to concentrate, but it took time, time she didn't have. The second man was reaching for the trigger of his AK47, just as the first man was squeezing the trigger of his rifle. It was impossible, there was no way she could paralyze both of them and her indecision had left them both free to fire at her. She saw the grin on his face as he squeezed the trigger. Spider's AK47 barked, but it was all too late. Ruby saw the muzzle flash, watched as the bullet left the gun, saw the man ripped apart by the burst Spider fired.

“Don't worry child.” Said Baba Yaga.

Everything stopped apart from the wind that Baba Yaga brought with her. Real wind, a hurricane that picked up the burning car and sent it hurtling into the woods. The bullet halfway to Ruby's head vanished into the night, as did most of the front of the house.

“Hold onto me.” Ruby said to Sarah.

Ruby felt the wind least, but even she was finding it hard not to be pushed across the stony ground. She saw Spider hanging onto a fence post, while Serge was keeping himself flat on the ground. For a second she couldn't see Olga, but then she noticed her on the edge of the woods, her arms locked around the trunk of a small sapling. It was then, when she went looking for him with her gift, that Ruby knew Carlos was dead. He was gone, had ceased to exist anywhere that she looked and that could only mean one thing.

“Carlos is dead.” She shouted.

It seemed sacrilegious for some reason, shouting it, but the noise around them made shouting necessary. Sarah merely looked at her and then hugged her, words weren't needed and the noise was growing. Ruby saw Baba Yaga hovering in the air and drifting towards the two men who she had robbed of their hands. There was no mercy now, the creature that had been quiet little Kallina, used her own gifts to lift them into the air and begin shredding their flesh. They could scream now, even above the hurricane wind, Ruby could hear the screams. She stopped looking and hung onto Sarah, hoping that none of her friends would be injured in the madness unfolding in Khulo.

It made sense now, the pictures in the DGSE file, the village in France where many of the people living there had been 'turned inside out,' as it said in the file. Had that village been the site of another battle between Das Geheimnis and their enemies ?

“No Baba Yaga, please no !”

Ruby looked up and Sarah looked too. The man with the sniper rifle was gone, his body no doubt shredded and scattered into the night. The last man alive from their enemies was still holding onto his Kalashnikov, but he showed no signs of using it. Throughout the east the children are taught about Baba Yaga. In Serbia they called her Baba Korizma, In Croatia mothers used Baba Roga as a threat to make unruly children behave. The Romanian mothers frightened their badly behaved children with stories of Baba Pehtra. Of course once the children grew up they became too sensible to believe such nonsense. The man in front of Baba Yaga was Russian and now he believed, he was once again a frightened child wanting his mother to save him from the wicked old woman of the woods. Baba Yaga showed no mercy, she shredded his flesh and turned his bones to dust, before sending what was left of him far into the woods.

Baba Yaga wasn't finished, it was if her rage was still growing. The house went, that too was turned into fragments. Brick, tile, wood, carpets, furniture and the bodies of the dead, all pulverised and sent off by the wind to cover the woods for miles. It stopped as quickly as it had started and dear quiet Kallina was looking at the debris where a large house had once stood. The burning car had set the woods alight and a broken electrical feed had ignited the broken furniture, which had piled up against the garden wall. As usual it was Olga who brought order to the chaos, though she was now limping instead of running.

"We have to go Ruby, someone will have called the emergency services."

"Quick, before the fire reaches the lane where the cars are." Said Ruby.

"Where is Carlos ?" Asked Olga.

"He's dead, killed saving my life." Said Leo.

Spider helped Olga, who was having real problems with her left knee. Serge set off in front and Ruby put her arm through Kallina's and led her towards the entrance to the lane.

"I'm not going any further with you Ruby. Get to Baku and remember what Kurt told you, be strong."

"Will I see you again ?"

"Perhaps, but the children are your responsibility now."

Kallina was gone, vanished again, leaving Ruby to run after the others. They easily beat the fire to their cars and now they fitted into the vehicles without scrunching up. No one mentioned Carlos, that would come later. They heard the sound of sirens as they turned left into the main road, the fire was spreading north with the prevailing wind. Spider looked over the seat, his hand over the SatNav controls.

"Baku ?" He asked.

Ruby nodded and Spider tapped in their destination. Serge was now driving the BMW estate and Ruby waved to him out of the rear window.

"Eight hundred and seventy kilometres," said Spider, "two days careful driving."

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The compound was on the outskirts of Rochester and even the sign on the gate looked worn out and neglected.

'Shield Security – Site regular patrolled with dogs.' It proclaimed.

Someone had used the sign for target practise, the airgun pellets had dented the metal but hadn't gone right through. A bored looking Asian lad in a poorly fitting uniform watched them and showed no signs of wanting to unlock the gates. He patted the German Shepherd by his side and walked back into his drafty office.

"Are you sure this is the place sir ? It looks like a car breakers." Said Terry.

"Yes, I've been here before. Get out and tell the guard that we're expected."

Terry walked up to the gates and after what looked like a brief argument the lad in the bad uniform unlocked the padlock on the gates and swung them open. Terry got back into the car, his features showing anger.

“The bastard warned me not to take car parts I hadn’t paid for.”

George chuckled as they drove past mountains of old tyres and then heaps of old cars, stacked on top of each other. Piled up to ridiculous heights, the rusty wrecks were a treasure trove to those looking for spares on a budget.

“He told me it’s a good cover,” said George, “lots of guys in anoraks looking for bits for old cars.”

“Who said that sir ? Who are we meeting ?” Asked the one who wasn’t Terry.

“You may not have heard of him, we’re here to see Sir Edwin Fox.”

“The spy who spies on the spies.” Said Terry.

George smiled at the description he’d heard a few times of his old friend ‘Foxy.’ At some point in the 70s or maybe the 80s, the exact date is still classified, the UK government became a little worried about the intelligence services. They could be forgiven a bit of overzealous action overseas and even the odd bit of brutality in Ireland, but at some point a line was crossed. It became obvious that some MPs were being followed, their phone calls monitored and recorded. Worst of all, they weren’t all left wing MPs, some were considered quite respectable. It was rumoured that someone quite close to the Prime Minister of the day, had said to her;

“We can’t have MI5 watching MPs, it’s a direct violation of our democratic principles. And of course, you never know what they might actually find.”

Something had to be done and Sir Edwin Fox was invited down to Chequers one rainy weekend. The result was a highly secret department that sat between the government and the spies and was only answerable to the Prime Minister of the day. The result was ‘Foxy’s Army,’ a small group of highly trained individuals who effectively ran the UKs security organisations. MI5, MI6, the nosy bastards of GCHQ, none of them did a thing without Foxy being copied in and approving. George had no more clue than most people about what Sir Edwin did for a living, until Ruby had briefly talked to him at an embassy do in Frankfurt.

“He seems worth cultivating.” George had commented.

At first George had stalked the man, seeking out his company and ways to please him. That hadn’t lasted long, Sir Edwin already had more than his fair share of wannabe friends. Instead a genuine mutual friendship had grown; they had many shared interests and were often invited to the same functions.

“How well do you know him ?” Asked Terry.

“Well enough to hope he can get us to the most dangerous place on the planet.”

The office block looked like something you’d find on a grubby industrial estate in Slough. The windows were grimy and the dirty net curtains hung at strange angles. There was no company name on the building, just a huge sign saying they had spares for most makes, including American imports. George walked into the building, Terry by his side. Another unimpressive young man in a uniform with ‘Security’ written on the breast pocket, looked at them enquiringly.

“Tell him George is here.”

Two more security desks and yet more grubby corridors and they were shown into a large office on the top floor. The one not called Terry waited outside, Terry kept close to George as he walked across the room and shook hands with Sir Edwin Fox.

“Oh dear George, you have got yourself into a spot of bother. Nothing that can’t be sorted out though.”

George was never quite sure who did go through all the invoices on the desk, or sort out problems in the scrap yard, but he was certain of one thing, it definitely wasn't Foxy. He sat in the comfortable leather chair on his side of the desk and nodded as Sir Edwin picked up a glass and a bottle of scotch. Terry was good, he didn't need to be given a hint, he wandered to the far end of the room and sat on the window sill.

"Can you still help me?" Asked George.

"You still intend to go chasing off to Turkmenistan to look for this girl?"

"Ruby and yes, she's almost like family to me."

Foxy picked up a piece of paper from his desk and pushed it across to George.

"It may be nothing George, all police forces makes mistakes. You should consider the situation before putting your life at risk."

The A4 sheet of paper had just two lines of text, printed right at the bottom.

"Romanian police are investigating the death of a young girl near the Bulgarian border. They have provisionally identified the body as Ruby Anne Mason."

George felt his heart begin to pound. The news wasn't unexpected, but it just didn't make sense. He had a headache, the kind that tries to rob the sufferer of rational thought.

"She left Romania some time ago," said George, "she's been seen since then. It must be a mistake."

"It may well be George, I just thought you should know. There's been no DNA confirmation yet and the body was difficult to identify..... in the woods for a while George."

The headache was still there, but George refused to let the news stop him. Ruby had been seen since leaving Romania, she simply couldn't be dead.

"I think of her as my daughter." He blurted out, without intending to say it out loud.

"I guessed that much George."

Sir Edwin stood up and opened the window behind him, letting a vague smell of burning rubber into the room.

"I have a certain sympathy for these Das Geheimnis George. Silly name really, the mysteries, the shadows, the bogeymen we know so little about. This was their world once George, we should have a proper name for them."

"You know about them?" Asked George.

"All the major powers do George, but only at the very top level. It was convenient George, to have a small number of super beings aiding our endeavours. If you ever thought a military victory was too good to be true, or at least too efficient, then it was probably Das Geheimnis. Some of the technology they gave us was.....it advanced us a good hundred years."

It all began to make sense to George and it explained why UK security forces seemed willing to put huge resources into stopping Ruby.

"I'm guessing they're not our friends these days." He said.

"Paranoia George, someone had the idea that eventually Das Geheimnis would become the masters and we'd become the servants. Personally I think they were wrong, but the idea gradually spread. It took a while, the French were the first to try to exterminate them. Two whole villages destroyed in southern France, just to kill a handful of super beings."

"I saw the pictures, the DGSE file said Das Geheimnis did the killing."

"Well they would, wouldn't they George. Russia, America, even good old Britain. We've all done our best to destroy them and their various stronghold around the world."

"Until their last place of sanctuary was in the desert of Turkmenistan."

"It would seem so George. As I say, personally I'm not against Ruby and her new friends. Will you tell her that George?"

George was deep in thought and the question almost went over his head.

"Sorry, tell her what?"

"If she lives and you find her and you all survive. Please tell her I'm on her side and I'd like her to contact me. Will you do that for me George?"

"Yes, though she has a mind of her own and may decide to avoid any contact with the what she sees as the UK government."

"Yes, yes, I see that George, but I can be a good friend and ally for her George, she'll be in need of a good ally. Of course your real problem isn't the Russian fleet, or DGSE or that psychopath Max. Your real problem and hers is the Americans."

George was fast approaching information overload, he hadn't even thought the Americans were involved at all. Terry was also giving him an odd look, he must have heard some of their conversation.

"The Americans Foxy! No one has even seen an American agent anywhere since she left London."

Sir Edwin poured them both another Scotch and made himself comfortable in his chair.

"I'll tell you a secret George. I always preferred dealing with the Russians. You knew where you were with them, they were stable and you usually knew which way they'd jump. But the Americans are a different matter they tend to be..... unpredictable. Especially now, with their drones. Everything tends to be done from a hanger in Ohio, no one on the ground. If they get a drone fix on where Ruby is going, they have a whole arsenal of high tech weaponry they can call in. You'll never even see it coming George."

"And the Americans are looking for these Das Geheimnis?"

"Oh yes George, who do you think chased them out of their base in Varna?"

George had questions in his head, questions he thought Sir Edwin might be able to answer.

"I was wondering about Ruby. She can't be one of them, she was born to ordinary people, I've seen her birth certificate. How is she able to do these things?"

"There have been a few incidents where what seemed like ordinary people have done extraordinary things. Usually those things have been nasty and destructive and the person hasn't survived. Luckily Ruby doesn't seem to have lost control of her new gift, at least not yet. The word we keep picking up about these people is 'partials,' though we have no idea what that means. Anyway George, we should discuss your training in Cyprus."

Terry jumped at the same time as George, no one had mentioned Cyprus until then.

"You don't think I'm letting you or your people do a low altitude drop into the desert without training do you. You'll need a few days at the base on Cyprus."

"But Ruby, she's rushing and will be in Turkmenistan before I can get there."

"There is always more time than you think George. Ruby will need to get to Baku and then she could have days of waiting before finding a ferry to Turkmenbashi. I'm assuming she has enough money to simply buy the right paperwork, but even so, the ferry takes at least fourteen hours and then she needs to get overland to where she's going."

Sir Edwin was looking at him and smiling.

"You've got plenty of time George. Now we need to discuss how to get you and your team to Cyprus."

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Max's leg was hurting like crazy by the time he reached the ruins of the house. He'd known Ruby was powerful, but he was surprised that the devastation was so total. The fire in the trees was growing and he could hear the sound of approaching sirens. There was even a car stopped in the road, the occupants gawping at the hole where a house had once been. Instinctively Max kept out of sight, moving north into the woods, approaching perilously close to the burning trees.

"Time to go give up and go home." He muttered to himself.

He had a little money left, but nowhere near enough to hire more mercenaries. Even if he could, would they do any better against Ruby? There were shreds of flesh in the trees, glistening in the light of the fires. Nothing remained of Marco and his friends, but shreds of flesh in the trees. Yes, it was definitely time to make a phone call and have someone meet him in Tbilisi with some money and a new passport. He had other clients, he could even avoid Europe completely for a while and stick to clients in America. Plenty of rich paranoid people there, people who'd pay him to keep them safe, with no genuine threats to worry about. No girls in their early twenties who could shred heavily armed men and turn a brick built house to rubble.

Like most people, Max didn't believe in God, fairies or bad luck, his philosophy was that 'shit happens.' Most soldiers tended to think the same way. It's hard to believe in a personal God after you've seen a comrade scream in agony for three hours before dying. The flames in front of him were actually making his face hot, so he moved slightly west and attempted to find gaps in the trees. Behind him the siren stopped and he could hear the commotion as the local fire fighters began to assess the situation. If it hadn't been for his leg, he'd never have found the body, but the Gods or fairies definitely weren't doing him a favour. Out of some strange logic, Baba Yaga had flung Carlos' body into the woods, but hadn't shredded it. After all, he was on their side and Ruby's friend.

"What the !!??"

Max's stick found a hole in the ground and he fell, falling right on top of the body. In the flickering flames, he could see the body wasn't one of his men, the clothing was too good and there was no odour of vodka and unwashed clothes. Max could hear voices, voices that seemed quite close. He ignored the shattered skull of the body and looked in the pockets. A wallet with quite a bit of money, good he'd hire a taxi to get to Tbilisi. Inside the jacket was a large envelope, folded over twice and shoved into his shirt. Max took the envelope and turned, heading away from the fire crew and hoping to get back on the road near his abandoned car. All fatigue seemed to leave his body, he had a clue, he might not be going home with his tail between his legs after all.

Over an hour it took him to get back to his car, his face covered in scratches from branches he'd failed to see in the dark. He lifted the hood and the problem was a loose battery lead, simple to fix once the urgency had passed. Max sat in his car and looked at the wallet first, feeling sorry that Carlos had died. There always was a certain mutual respect among mercenaries and Carlos had been well thought of. He kept the five hundred Euros and threw the wallet out of the window. Next came the envelope and Max started to laugh as soon as he saw the map with the large red circle in the desert of Turkmenistan. Carlos had even underlined a grid reference, he had it all.

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"I hadn't expected high rise buildings." Said Spider.

Ruby had, she had all Kallina's memories of Baku in her head, including the best way to drive to see her fixer, the famous Jalil, who Kallina had thought quite well of.

"You can trust him as long as you have money in your pocket." Kallina had told her.

Jalil could wait until morning though, Ruby badly needed a decent meal, a comfortable bed and a long cold drink. She wasn't even too worried about the order they came in. They'd found

somewhere to stay the night before, a small place just inside the Georgian border. It had been clean, but the beds had been lumpy and there had been live music until almost sun up. Spider slowed down and gave his usual half look over the back of his seat.

“So, where to boss ?” He asked with a grin.

Baku, largest City in the Caucasus, population of a mere two million, give or take. Ruby had it all in her head and the hotel where Kallina had spent a passionate weekend with Kurt.

“The sea front Spider, right into the heart of the tourist area. They have a Marriott here and I feel the need of some pampering.”

“Really ?” Shouted Sarah, as though she doubted her ears.

“Yes, we all need a bit of luxury and we can afford it.”

Ruby began to laugh and prodded Spider in the back.

“The Marriott my man and step on it.”

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