

Ruby IV : Just A Shadow

Chapter 16 - Baku

“Her wound hadn’t bled that much, but she seemed to be wanting to rest all the time. He’d looked Lena over quickly using a small flashlight and there was no livid bruising, no tell-tale signs of internal bleeding.”

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Napoleon had once said he’d rather have lucky generals than good ones. Ruby wasn’t sure if she believed in coincidences, but deep down, she believed there was such a thing as luck. She’d seen enough of the world to know that bad people weren’t always punished. When she thought about it, which wasn’t often, she was sure that luck and karma were inextricably linked in some way.

“Oh, that is a lot of equipment to unpack.” Said Todd.

“We’ve quite a few wunderkinds to help.” She said. “Treat them like fork lifts and pallet trucks. They’re remarkably strong. I’ve seen Sophie lift several times her own body weight.”

The crates had arrived later than expected, it was the night before the day they’d wanted to leave Muscat. Most of the crates were from Britain, though two had originated in Bakersfield, California in the USA. The Bakersfield crates had been the problem. The carrier had waited for them to arrive, to send everything at the same time.

“Yeah, but Sophie only weighs about twelve ounces.” Said Spider.

“One day I will hurt you.” Said Sophie.

“Looking at it all won’t get it done.” Said Ruby. “We need to screen off an area near the loading ramp. We’ll need lights too and plenty of willing hands.....Actually, we need everyone.”

“I saw some screens outside the UPS warehouse.” Said Charlotte.

“Don’t forget to ask them first.” Said Todd.

“Yeah, well.....If I ask, they might say no.”

“We have portable lights.” Said McGill. “My guys will help.”

Several huge crates full of fragile electronics and potentially dangerous explosives. Foxy had even promised to send a state of the arts battlefield comms system. Ruby had her gifts, but a microphone and headset made life simpler. Once the crates were screened off from the outside world and well lit, they made good progress.

“How about boxes inside boxes ?” Asked Sarah. “Sorry....I meant are we keeping small items wrapped in bubble wrap, in their boxes ?”

“Use your initiative, everyone.” Said Todd. “If it’s easier to stack a small box on the Antonov, leave things in their original containers.”

“I bagsy the first energy weapon we unwrap.” Said Max.

There were a few looks by the soldiers of McGill’s Marauders, or whatever they were now called. They were going to see things, there was no avoiding it. Once the fighting began, they’d realise they’d become involved in a form of warfare that definitely wasn’t traditional. As with Doc and his people in Kenya. McGill and his fighters would be paid enough to keep quiet, once they were no longer needed. The crate from London with two energy weapons inside, had a specific stencil on the outside. Just a very rough stencil of a fox, but Ruby knew what it meant. She almost stopped one of

McGill's fighters from opening it. They'd know everything eventually though, so Ruby let the woman dig through the layers of bubble wrap and pieces of packing material.

"This looks impressive.....Do we get to use these ?" Asked the woman.

"Maybe, once they've been tested." Said Ruby

The early versions had a tiny red light to show that it was charged. Designed by an engineer, rather than a soldier trying to remain hidden in the dark. The latest version showed nothing until you knew how to activate it. The energy weapon would have been draining small amounts of power all the way from London. Even from the cargo plane it had arrived on.

"I'm sure it'll be fully charged and ready to go." She said.

Ruby picked up the one in the crate and pressed at just the right places behind the trigger. There was a reassuring throbbing sound as the weapon came to life. Ruby brought up the targeting screen.

"Yep, looks ready to use."

"Oh, I definitely want one." Said McGill. "Even though I have no idea what it does."

Luck again, was Ruby having a lucky day ? Or, were the two young men having a period of staggeringly bad luck ? Ruby felt Sophie react and then Kallina, though neither of them were preparing to use their gifts against the intruders. Todd yelled and Ruby could see a young man with a knife, a long thin blade. Todd had been cut, there was blood on his T shirt.

"He's after you." Kallina was saying in her head. "Todd will be fine, he's after you."

Ruby had never heard or seen, Todd get beaten in a knife fight. He was good, even with a wounded upper arm. The second young man was the problem and she hadn't even noticed him. Muscat had an international airport and they weren't even supposed to be using it as a parking spot for their Hotel Antonov. Strangers wandered through all the time. Once through the perimeter fence with its checks and gates, there was an assumption strangers were safe. They had to be, or they wouldn't be there.

"Get that fucker off Todd." Someone yelled.

The second man was just a few yards away, looking at her, as if making sure she was the person he'd been sent to kill. Short for his age, which was probably early twenties. Thin with dark hair, he'd have merged into any crowd, in any middle eastern country. So nondescript that he was invisible, which made him the perfect assassin. Too much noise in his head for her smile to work well and too many emotions in the group around her. She had to try though.

"You really don't want to hurt me." She said.

Her special smile on about two thirds power and he looked confused. He was still raising a gun up though, aiming at her. He meant to shoot her in the head and he had no intention of being distracted. With more time her smile never failed, but there was no more time.

"Will someone shoot that guy ?" Shouted Charlie.

Todd was wounded, they were all shouting about the man who'd stabbed him. Two shots rang out, something else to explain to the local authorities. Todd's attacker was almost certainly dead, so why weren't they leaping on the guy in front of her. He was quiet and had made no moves likely to get him noticed. He actually looked a little like two of the young men in McGill's Marauders.

"Sorry." Said Ruby.

The idea was to fire low, there could be no risk of someone behind him being hit by whatever the energy weapons did to humans. Ruby had the weapon in her hands, the business end pointed at just above his knees. It would probably be unpleasant for the young man, painful as hell before he died. Dreadful, but he had left her with no other option. She fired the energy weapon.

Not a stealth weapon, Lily had told her the new ones sounded like a lightning storm in a small confined space. A flash of yellowish light, accompanied by the crack of thunder. It was quick though, the young man holding the gun, was obviously dead. Before what was left of him, hit the ground. Not turned to mush, though it was hard to think of a term to cover it. He'd melted, like an ice cream left out on a hot day. Even the gun he'd been carrying looked melted and fused together. Some of his rib bones were still recognisable, but on the whole.....He was a formless blob of melted flesh. Even though it had been him or her, it still seemed a dreadful way to die.

"Crap.....I thought he was one of the airport workers." Said Spider.

Sophie understood, she came to her and held her hand for a couple of seconds.

"Better him than you." Said Sophie.

Several people were throwing up, including the woman from McGill's people who Spider thought was alright. Lily didn't vomit, but she stood there, as if frozen to the spot, looking at the dreadful remains on the tarmac. Ruby didn't want or desire to take charge at that moment, but she had to.

"Pictures for London, we need pictures." Said Ruby. "Sophie.....You know how to wrap things. Send a whole burner phone if its easiest, but they need to see what these things do to people. Put a note with the phone too. Otherwise, they'll wonder what the hell we've sent them."

"Alright, I'll get it done."

"Then we're likely to get a visit from airport security." Said Ruby. "There were shots fired, which they're duty bound to ask about."

"It was an accident; my gun has a fault." Said Kallina. "It will never happen again."

"Well....I'm convinced." Said Todd.

Poor Todd, Luca was pushing a dressing against a nasty looking wound in his arm. His comment caused a few smiles, which broke the sombre mood, just a little. The problem was that both of the attackers had died. Bad for them and it made it impossible to interrogate them.

"We need to dispose of the bodies." Said McGill.

Ruby had been about to mention that, though she was happy for McGill to tread on her toes a little, as long as he didn't do it that often.

"Yes, the bodies need bagging and quickly being a long way from here." Said Ruby. "Kallina, could you.....Do your thing ? Please."

"Yes, I'll dump them a few miles offshore in the Gulf of Oman."

A few looks from McGill and his fighters, but they'd quickly pick up on the wunderkinds and their abilities. As for Kallina and her change to Baba Yaga.....That was likely to always scare them. There were times when it still scared the crap out of Ruby.

"Move people, we need to get everything on the Antonov." Said Ruby. "I'll wait for the airport people to arrive. Someone needs to tell the pilot we're leaving in a couple of hours."

"I can do that." Said Sarah.

"Who'd create a weapon to do that to people." Said one of the marauders.

Ruby had already made up her mind to tell McGill what kind of enemy they were likely to face. What he then told his fighters was up to him. As for telling him about the wunderkinds. If he hadn't worked out they weren't like other young adults, by the time they landed in Baku, then he wasn't as bright as she thought.

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Einar Gunnarsson was half carrying Lena. They'd been attacked while asleep in their tents, the other four in their party were dead. Einar had been lucky; his bladder had demanded to be emptied in the middle of the night. He'd heard the sounds, the screams and gunfire. The trainer from his army days

had instilled in him the idea of walking some distance before squatting and doing what needed to be done.

“No one wants to find their own personal latrine, while collecting firewood.”

It was a wise notion and Einar had kept to it, always. Walking about a quarter of a mile had probably saved his life. He’d fired at one of their attackers, hitting whatever it was, he was sure of it. He’d started wondering if he’d shot a person, a human, when it had screamed. Nothing like the scream any human would make, ever. More like the angry roar of a wounded bear. Einar was good with an assault rifle and he’d fired three times. Whatever he’d hit had roared at him and run away. Three high velocity rounds at fairly close range and it had still managed to run.

“Can we stop, just for a while ?” Asked Lena.

“Alright, but only for five minutes.”

He helped her sit on a fallen tree, there were quite a few of those. An unmanaged ancient woodland. It was beautiful in the day, but a death trap at night. Holes in the ground, quite a few sudden drops and of course, mud. Einar loathed trudging through mud and they were both caked in the awful stuff. Tempting to use his small flashlight now they were some way from the camp, but it was hearing the roar of whatever it was. Nothing much scared him, but no one can be brave against the unknown.

“How does the dressing feel ?” He asked. “Has it slipped about ?”

“No, it feels fine.”

The wound had looked more like it had been done by a claw than a weapon. Four deep grooves on her shoulder, with one going right down to the bone. No running until he’d put a dressing on the wound and got Lena into some clothes. The others were dead, ripped apart in their sleep. The most worrying thing in many ways had been the shredded tyres on their vehicles. It was as if they’d been attacked by wild creatures of some kind.

“We’re on the other side of the island.” Said Lena. “We could risk sleeping, just for a while.”

“No, we have to keep moving. There should be phone reception once we cross over the bridge to Skagen.”

“Fine, but give me five more minutes.”

Einar felt guilty, they had been sharing a tent and a bed roll. Silly really and it broke so many rules. He didn’t see how it could have caused the deaths of the others, but his troubled mind wouldn’t let the idea go. He should have known better; he should have remained focused.

“At least we now have a good idea what happened to the tourist couple.” Said Lena.

“Just five kilometres, Lena.” Said Einar. “We’ll be in Skagen and there’s a tourist hostel there. My phone will work once we’re there, I’m sure of it. They have to know what happened to us.”

“I know, we have to report in.”

There were sounds in the woods, just the noises made by wild animals in the forest. Once he’d have ignored them, but not now. He waited for a while, giving Lena more than her five-minute rest. Eventually he helped her to her feet. A quick look at the luminous compass on his left wrist.

“There, we’ll head just a little east of north.” He said, pointing.

“The woods are worst that way.”

“I know.....Sorry.” He said.

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Nadia Irina Petrova would admit to being born in Russia, though she’d rarely tell anyone exactly where. Russia was like that, even before Putin arrived on the scene. In a country where every public official feels they have a right to know all your business, people became very good at preserving

their privacy. The gulag had long gone, but the people of Russia never forgot it, or that it might return one day. Budapest had its problems, but after living in Vladivostok for years, it felt as though she'd moved to a small annexe of paradise. She was currently sat in a cubicle in Olga's office, talking to the shipping agent, Elio Fulci. He had no idea that she wasn't part of the Gallaan organisation.

"Of course you're worth more Elio, but my hands are tied." She said.

"Ten percent seems a little low, considering the risks."

"Maybe next time, but ten is the agreed rate." She said. "We are talking about ten percent of over three million American dollars.... Don't kill the deal, Elio."

He was greedy, ruthless and reportedly a borderline sociopath. There was no way Elio was going to walk away from ten percent of three point one million and they both knew it.

"No.....Of course I'll carry out my part." Said Elio. "And once the containers reach the Turkish border with Russia. Who will take over from there?"

"You know I can't tell you that."

She couldn't tell him without a bit of a struggle, though the two key stooges would end up knowing each other's identity. When the Russians opened empty crates, the two of them would fight like rats in a sack. Blaming each other at first, before everyone blamed the Gallaan Organisation. A complex and fragile plan, but wonderful when it worked...If it worked.

"I have to know." Said Elio. "Supposing something goes wrong. Container ship captains are usually reliable, but supposing I end up delivering a container full of nothing but rat droppings. I need her name. I know it's a woman, you've mentioned 'her' several times."

"The container ship doesn't even have a list of what is in which container. There's no way the cargo can be fiddled with or removed en-route." Said Nadia.

"I need to know.....Or I want twelve percent."

Ahh, so that was his plan all along. Tell me the identity of the lady I'm never supposed to know, or pay me an extra two percent. It made sense and judging by what she'd been told, it was classic Elio Fulci.

"Twelve or you walk? Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes, twelve or I walk.....Or tell me her name?"

He'd pushed her enough, especially as she was supposed to be just an employee of Gallaan. Time to tell him the name he'd assume he'd sweated her for.

"Maya Mizrahi, though I never told up that."

"I've heard of her, none of it good." Said Elio.

"We're not asking you to sleep with her."

He'd actually met Maya; they'd shared a coffee and doughnuts in Italy. Each had been given another name for the other. The plan was potentially fragile, very fragile. Not that there was any need for them to meet again, outside of an FSB interrogation facility. They'd claim to not know one another, which would quickly be shown to be false. Olga had pictures of Elio flirting with Maya, in a restaurant in Milan.

"Alright, thanks for her name." Said Elio.

Olga put her head around the door, while Nadia was updating her notes. The problem with such a complex sting was the many levels of people who knew, or didn't know what was going on.

"Well..... Do you think it will work?" Asked Olga.

"I'd say it's still fifty-fifty." Said Nadia. "Once Elio is in Turkey, I'd put that up to eighty-twenty that it'll work."

"The containers are being swapped at sea." Said Olga. "Pray for good weather in the Adriatic."

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George Polandrous had begun to rotate the methods and airlines he used for his regular trips from London to Paris and back again. Where was home for him now ? Like a politician he'd begun to alter his words according to the audience. In London he was a Londoner, who'd always have a corporate presence in the country. Sometimes in Paris, and he wasn't proud of it, he'd claim to totally committed to being a European. Je suis un européen, as he'd told a banker in Paris, only the day before. He eased his conscience by realising his words at meetings weren't broadcast around the world, as were the speeches of politicians. Where did he feel most at home ? If he was being truthful, he was no longer sure.

"The train was supposed to be running on time." He muttered.

"At least the London traffic isn't too bad." Said his driver.

He'd flown out to Paris and there'd been a delay. Changing airlines rarely worked, as delays tended to affect everyone. Our ancestors would have marvelled at our ability to travel around the world at speed. But at least horse drawn travel didn't involve three hours stuck in a departure lounge. He was back in London a day early, due to a phone call from Penny.

"Oh, it just had to rain." He muttered.

"Is there less of it in Paris ? Rain I mean."

"No, not really."

They weren't expecting him, so there was no one running to meet him with an umbrella. George had decided long ago that a man of his age running, never looked cool. He'd tried jogging once, until he'd caught his reflection in a shop window. Not far from the car to the doors of the Polandrous Foundation, so he did it at a dignified pace. A woman he recognised was on reception, with a large man sat not far away. Penny had hired a few muscular types, her words, not his, to add a little extra security.

"Oh, you're wet.....We weren't expecting you until tomorrow."

"No problem Dianne, it's only water. Is Penny in the building ?"

"Yes, she's in her office.....The corner office."

It wasn't that he was trying to catch her out, or fuss over her like a mother hen, or was that a father hen ? Some of the things in their telephone conversation were concerning and he knew she rarely asked for help. Not just him, Malou had been worried too, when he'd repeated some of the conversation. Like an old friend, the lift recognised him and took him up to the floor where Penny had her much loved corner office, with its wonderful view. He knocked on the glass office door, making eye contact, before opening it.

"I knew it.....I just knew you'd come back early." Said Penny.

"It was Malou, she insisted."

"Yes, of course George."

They shared a little laughter at his expense. George sat down, choosing a chair to give him a view of the Shard. At that moment he realised the answer to where was home now. It was and always would be London. Penny called down for coffee and a plate of biscuits, which made it feel even more like home.

"So, the death of this Razors character." He said. "How does that change things ?"

"From what I can work out, Foxy and his people expected him to be killed, though special branch are said to be a bit embarrassed by it all." Said Penny.

"So much for them not losing him."

“They didn’t, not for a second.” Said Penny. “What they failed to do was spot the person sent to kill him. Ronald told me they suspect a woman who was seen in the street at an unusual hour. I’m told female assassins are rare and very expensive to hire.”

“And.....Come on Penny, I can tell when you’re keeping the best until last...Tell all ?”

“Connie Hughes, AKA Razors, isn’t the sharpest of criminals. Ronald said that even his mother wouldn’t have called him clever. It was assumed he’d lead special branch to the boss who’d hired him to watch our offices. It seems he did and knowing him rather well, his boss decided to get rid of a potential problem. Razors saw a few people before ending up in the river, down near Wapping. Only one seems to fit the right profile. Now the police will keep a watch on him.....and then his contacts.....and.....you get it George.”

“I do....Do we have a name for Razor’s paranoid boss ?” He asked.

“No, they’re keeping that secret.”

“I could easily find out.” Said George. “What do you think ? We could even hire someone to go through his bins and dig about in his life.”

“A name would be nice George, though as for the rest.....Best to leave that to Foxy and special branch.”

“Yes, you’re probably right, Penny. Where have those biscuits got to ?”

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Ruby had wanted wheels up within two hours of the two men trying to kill her, probably Todd too. There were the airport authorities to keep sweet and there was no running away from that. Permission to take off required no red flags against their elderly Antonov. It had taken two phone calls and several bribes that turned out to be larger than she’d expected. Whatever else might happen in Baku, she needed to visit a bank and add to her supply of cash. Dollars were favourite and Euros, with a few hundred in sterling for old time’s sake. She’d already had words with the pilot about his obvious scorn for health and safety procedures.

‘This is your pilot. We’re about to take off and should land in Baku in approximately three and a half hours. Please fasten seat belts and return trays to the upright position.’

“What trays ?” Asked Kallina. “We don’t even have seats.”

“He’s just being a smart arse.” Said Ruby.

“At least we now know when to grab hold of something solid.” Said Sarah.

There had been a little routine maintenance to their aircraft, all part of what was required to keep it legally in the air. Sarah had spoken to the local engineers who’d told her that for its age and the number of hours in the air, the Antonov wasn’t in too bad a condition. To Ruby that sounded like damning with faint praise, but as it was the only aircraft they had.....

“Oh, I might eventually get to like flying, but never taking off.” Said Delmar.

No time to get to the compartment she shared with Todd, with its comfortable mattress on the floor. There were straps attached to pegs in the floor, intended to hold cargo in place. Ruby sat on the floor, pushing her arms through the straps. A quick look showed her she’d just sat with her back to several boxes of high explosives. Sarah was grinning at her from further along the inside of the aircraft.

“They should take off like this from Heathrow.” Said Sarah. “It’d make the average intercontinental flight a lot less boring.”

“I like boring flights.” Yelled Delmar. “Give me a boring airline every time.”

The rumbling sound began quite quickly, the sound of huge aircraft tyres travelling along taxiways. The massive acceleration came soon after, with Ruby glad she was wedged into a tight place. As the plane climbed, something rolled across the floor and bounced off someone's suitcase.

"Now you've mentioned it, Sarah." Yelled Ruby, above the roar of the engine. "I could get used to taking off from Heathrow like this. A bit rough on the parents with small children."

"They'd get used to it." Shouted Sarah.

"Fuck em." Yelled Charlie, from further up the plane.

Ruby remembered one eight-hour flight just two rows away from a constantly crying baby, so she had some sympathy with Charlie's remark. When the plane levelled out, normality returned to their hotel in the air.

'Bing Bong, this is your pilot. You may undo your seat belts and move around the cabin.'

It was no good, she was going to have to have another word with the pilot. There was useful stuff and there was the verbal equivalent of pop-up website notifications.

"I preferred it when he never told us anything." Said Delmar.

McGill and his marauders, a name they seemed to love, had claimed the area close to the loading ramp. Ruby had warned them it was where loose items tended to end up, during take-off. She could see McGill talking to man who had a thermos flask in his hand. The thermos looked like Spider's and the conversation was quite heated.

"Someone else can deal with that." She muttered.

Back to their compartment between the cargo bay and the outside hull of the aircraft. Engine noise was worse there, but it had quickly become their place, their Den. Ruby locked the door, which meant pushing home a large bolt. Todd was looking at some paperwork, but quickly seemed to get the idea. They were soon a hot sweaty heap on the mattress.

"Every time we land somewhere new. Or take off from somewhere.....Agreed ?" She asked.

"Oh yes, you'll hear no arguments from me."

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Her wound hadn't bled that much, but she seemed to be wanting to rest all the time. He'd looked Lena over quickly using a small flashlight and there was no livid bruising, no tell-tale signs of internal bleeding. It was either internal damage he couldn't see or Lena was going into shock. Either choice was bad news.

"No, we can't stop again." Said Einar. "The airstrip is close; we should see it once we're out of this wood."

Mud and small areas of woodland were just about all they'd seen for a few miles. According to the map he'd memorised the airstrip and hostel at Skagen were only a few kilometres from where they'd camped. They must have been turned around in the dark, they seemed to have walked miles in the dark. Now he was sure though, they'd crossed the bridge and there was only one bridge and only one road. They had to be close to Skagen.

"Just five minutes, Einar." Said Lena. "Let me sleep for a few minutes and I'll be fine."

He hugged her and kissed her cheek. Something was wrong, but he had no idea what it was.

"No sleep.....Listen to me." He said. "It's really important that you stay awake.....Do you understand what I'm saying ?"

"Alright, I heard you.....No going to sleep."

He was still half carrying her, which was another reason for it taking them so long to reach Skagen. As they came out of the trees, the airstrip was there. One or two of the buildings had lights outside,

the first lights they'd seen since abandoning their camp. Just seeing manmade lights made such a difference.

"See Lena.....See, there are lights."

"I hope they have coffee." Said Lena. "Coffee and a huge pile of doughnuts."

The airstrip had a name, Stokmarknes Airport, Skagen. Gallaan had told him to avoid the airport unless it was an emergency. Arriving in their SUVs was considered more covert than bringing in the team and their equipment by air. Einar couldn't fly a plane and anyway, there were none on the ground. Stokmarknes was a short airstrip in the middle of nowhere. Planes came and went, but there was no reason for them to stay there. Einar's first and very important need, was to find a phone, a landline or a reliable satellite phone. He had to report in.

"Yes, I bet they have doughnuts, Lena." He said.

Lena seemed more alert, looking around at the two or three buildings to the east of the airstrip. The tourist hostel had a name, but he couldn't remember it. Likely to be just a single-story building with a few beds, but they were certain to have some kind of telephone. Einar dug his own phone out of a pocket and as he suspected, it still wasn't connecting. When Lena nuzzled his neck, he knew she was feeling better.

"Oh, Einar....My feet are cold." She said. "When we have a room at the hotel, you can warm my feet."

"I don't think it's that kind of hotel."

"Cold feet and the monsters have my chocolate." Said Lena.

"What monsters?"

"I'm not sure.....It was probably all a dream."

They'd left four dead comrades at their camp, so it was all far from being a dream. As they walked towards the hostel. Einar began to think of a story that would get them the use of a phone.

"We had a car accident, Lena." He said. "Just remember that.....We had a car accident and you can't remember anything about it."

"They'll find poor Michael.....And the others."

"We'll be long gone by then. We just need them to let us use a phone. So, we had a car accident and....."

"I don't remember it. I know, I'm not an idiot."

"Sorry."

Lena wasn't armed, he knew that as he'd dressed her. He'd picked up a nine-millimetre handgun and shoved it into an inside pocket of his jacket. There had been his assault rifle, but he'd abandoned it somewhere along the road. Carrying it and supporting Lena, had been impossible. His jacket was so padded against the Norwegian cold, that no one would see the bulge of the 9mm. No cover story is ever perfect, but as he looked them over under the hostel's outside lights, they fitted the story. A little blood on the side of Lena's head and they were both covered in mud.....Perfect.

"How bad was the crash.....What did we hit?" Asked Lena.

"We hit a tree; the SUV is a write off." He said. "If they ask anything else, you can't remember.....Alright?"

"I don't remember that much anyway, just the monsters."

Einar sighed and hugged her. It was going to be one of those nights, but he did have a gun in his pocket. If things became complicated, he'd use the threat of the gun to get the use of a phone. Numbers could be traced, but the usual routine was to use a burner phone at the other end and

dispose of it once the mission was over. As far as Einar was concerned, their mission was well and truly over. He just needed a pickup for them both.

“No mentioning monsters, please.”

“Did I mention my feet being cold ?” Asked Lena.

“Yes, you did.....Come on, lets get inside and out of the cold.”

So close to warmth and hopefully that coffee, but a van drove up. A few steps backwards and Einar had Lena in the dark again, in a gap between two single storey wooden buildings. The van had a sign on the side, though he couldn't make out the words. The driver was almost at the door to the hostel, when something had him. Dressed like a man, though it moved too fast to be human. It used claws rather than teeth, ripping out the van driver's throat before he could shout for help, or scream.

“Oh, fuck !” Said Lena. “What is that.....Thing ?”

Not her fault, she was probably still in shock and suffering from a mild concussion. It looked up at them, with the yellowest eyes Einar had ever seen. A huge thing, twice the size and weight of the biggest soldier he'd ever served with. Bits of it were moving under its clothing, where people didn't have body parts that moved around. Einar moved in front of Lena and reached for his gun.

It went, it picked up the driver and ran away with him. The van driver held under one arm, while it sped off on two legs, like a human. The van's engine was still running and Einar made a decision that wasn't really by the book.

“Come on Lena, we're taking the van.”

It took time to get her in the passenger seat, all the time expecting the creature to come back. The van was old and had never been designed for speed. The hostel seemed to be in the rear-view mirror for an eternity.

“What do you think it was ?” Asked Lena.

“One of the things we were sent us to investigate. They should have warned us.”

“Do you mean an alien ?”

“I don't know Lena....I don't fucking know.”

Orders were to use the first available method to report in. Einar knew they could reach Sortland fairly quickly, even in the very slow van. There was a proper hotel at Sortland with decent beds and a shower where Lena could get her feet warm. Food too and there'd be a phone in their room. Best of all there'd be people in Sortland, real human beings, over five thousand of them according the last census. Einar felt his hands trembling as he drove.

“We'll dump the van on the edge of town and walk.” He said. “Do you remember the cover story ?”

“Yes, of course I do. Our SUV hit a tree. I bumped my head and I don't remember anything else.”

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The number of windows anywhere on the Antonov was low, it was designed for cargo rather than people. Ruby wanted to be on the flight deck for more than one reason, though mainly she wanted to see Baku, capital of Azerbaijan, from the air. A beautiful city on the western edge of the Caspian Sea. Ruby had first visited the city when she'd been twenty and fairly new to the path less travelled. She'd quickly learned to love Baku, though she never forgot that Azerbaijan wasn't always a safe place to be. Then again, all the best places were rarely completely safe.

“I don't know how it was arranged, but we have permission to land.” Said the pilot.

“They had no reason to say no.” Said Ruby. “It is Azerbaijan though, so you never know for sure.”

The plane went out over the sea, turning to approach Heydar Aliyev International Airport from the south. The entire city was there in front of her and because of the friends she'd lost there, the view had meaning. Not necessarily a bad feeling, she'd spent some happy times in Baku.

“The first time I drove here.” She said. “In an old clunker that barely made it.”

“Sounds a bit like our Antonov.” Said Todd.

“Hey, never insult her.....Our Antonov might take offence.” Said the pilot.

Ruby waited until they were close to landing, before taking Todd to their windowless compartment.

It was only three hours and forty minutes since they’d taken off from Muscat. But still.....

“Once agreed on a ritual has to be followed.” She told Todd, as she stepped out of her knickers.

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