

## Ruby

### Chapter 15 - Turkmenistan

**“You’ll be jumping at night and over unknown terrain. All you can do is jump and hope that you land on something soft.”**

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They’d probably landed at Akrotiri in Cyprus, but it had been night when the small private jet had landed, so George couldn’t be certain. Their plane had been given the call sign of ‘Grandfather 1,’ which George had decided was Foxy’s attempt at humour. The quarters he’d been given were clean and reasonably comfortable.

“We can easily house an extra twelve hundred men, if something big kicks off.”

The man in RAF blue had told him as he put his case next to the bed. A double bed, he’d obviously been given the space and relative comfort of an apartment in the married quarters. Terry and two others had flown out with him, it was interesting to watch them come alive as they landed and became almost part of the military again. Terry had woken him the next morning, when his body clock was still completely confused.

“You’re ok for breakfast sir; the canteen runs round the clock for the returning flight crews.” Terry had told him.

Returning from where? Who had the politicians decided needed looking at or bombing now? The rest of the team had arrived on another plane, just in time for a late lunch. George had his first meeting with someone everyone just called ‘Sarge,’ no doubt his rank in some branch of the UK services. Sarge later admitted to being called Stephen Poole, who’d risen to the rank of Captain, but never said exactly where. Harry had chosen well, Sarge was built like a brick outhouse and he was perfect for the job of keeping George’s team under control. Then the real training had started and George realised how unfit his sedentary lifestyle had made him. He’d been at the RAF base for three days before they stopped the general fitness training and introduced him to a low altitude drop parachute. A quiet and bored looking man in jeans and trainers had arrived with two other trainers. George was shown a parachute and its harness, stretched out on a wooden table.

“Normally I’d give your team at least three practise drops from a thousand feet, but I’m told time is a factor.” Said Snowy.

Norman was the trainer who wore nothing but denim and trainers, the one everyone at the base seemed to respect. He introduced himself simply as Norman, no rank or second name. He’d added that;

“Everyone calls me Snowy though, I suppose it’s the hair.”

His age was difficult to judge, he looked fit, fit as a butcher’s dog as Terry had noted. His hair though was completely white and made him look at least fifty. He continued to point out things on the parachute and its harness.

“You get a reserve, but dropping from five hundred feet, you’ll never get it open anyway.” Continued Snowy.

“I’ve never done a drop from that low.” Said Terry.

Snowy eyed them up, all seven men who were going to drop from a plane at five hundred feet over the most barren and isolated part of the planet. He’d never once asked them why they were going, he was probably told not to.

“We’ll put all your kit in three pods, which will land near you. So you’re not going to be carrying anything, weight is a crucial factor in a low altitude drop.”

George was still thinking of the team as Terry and the non-Terrys, but one of them put his hand up and quietly waited to ask a question.

“What did you want to know ?” Asked Snowy.

“Can you give us some safety stats, like percentage of canopies opening at five hundred feet ?”

Snowy pointed at the other trainers who’d arrived with him. George had no idea who they were, but he guessed that Foxy had sent the best he could find.

“My team will repack and check your parachutes before you leave and the official statistics are that 99.98% of canopies will fully open. The plane will also try to give you six hundred feet, but it can be difficult to judge height over the desert.”

“What plane are we using ?” Asked Sarge.

“We’ll be using an RAF transport for the practise jump today. For the actual mission, someone in London has sourced an old Russian transport. I’m told it’s quite old, but it’s been checked over and will be reliable.” Answered Snowy.

“So if it all goes tits up, we’re just a gang of crazy Ivans.” Sad Terry.

Everyone chuckled and even Snowy’s team joined in.

“That seems to be a fair assessment of the situation,” said Snowy, “now we need to get a move on if you’re going to be doing a training drop today.”

George watched as everyone was fitted into a harness and given a long list of instructions. By the time it was his turn, he’d learned the routine by heart.

“I can tell you all this stuff,” Said Snowy, “but you’ll be jumping at night and over unknown terrain. All you can do is jump and hope that you land on something soft.”

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Ruby had her tickets to Turkmenbashi, though it was more of a letter of intent than anything that resembled a ticket. The owners and captain of the Night Princess agreed to transport Ruby’s cargo from Baku to Turkmenbashi on the soonest available sailing to that port. No mention of price was included, or the fact that six passengers were going with the cargo. It appeared that passengers weren’t a huge interest to the ferry owners and they’d be travelling at their own risk.

“It’s translated into Portuguese on the back.” Sarah had pointed out.

They had no idea why, the Portuguese version on the back would have to remain another mystery about Ferry travel on the Caspian Sea. Jalil had become a regular visitor, though Ruby suspected he appreciated the restaurant meals more than the company of her and her oddball friends. It was Jalil who’d suggested that Ruby visited the ship they’d be travelling on.

“Introduce yourself to the captain; get a feel for the vessel. He’ll be there on Wednesday afternoon.” Jalil had suggested.

Ruby had taken Spider and Sarah and they’d driven there in the Audi that Sarah loved. The ferry terminal was less a terminal and more a series of old and untidy docks with no signposting of any kind. Ruby had Kallina’s memories, but she still had Spider drive down two wrong roads, before finding where the Night Princess was tied up. Spider parked as close to the nearest walkway onto the ship that he could see.

“It’s a bit squalid, are you sure this is our ship ?” Asked Sarah.

“I’m afraid it is.” Answered Ruby.

There was a row of large oil drums on the jetty, obviously part of someone’s cargo that needed to be taken aboard. It was difficult to tell what was cargo and what was rubbish that had simply been left

to rust away. An old portable generator had been left near the walkway and it was obvious that it would never start up again. The walkway itself was at a very steep angle and they needed to almost climb it to get onto the deck of the ferry. Once again it was difficult to tell what was cargo and what rubbish, at least two rusty old oil drums leant against one of the two chimneys that came up from the engine room.

“Do we get rooms ?” Asked Sarah.

“From what Jalil told me, it’s probably best if we stay on deck. We can buy a few folding chairs and a cooler box, the journey only takes about fourteen hours.” Answered Ruby.

“Fourteen hours on this !!”

Sarah was looking upset, but Ruby ignored her and looked around for any of the crew, so far they’d seen no one.

“Hello, is anyone on board ?” She shouted.

Spider kicked one of the old oil drums and shouted;

“Shop !” at the top of his voice.

Two young lads in tatty jeans and T shirts appeared, one of them keeping slightly back from the other.

“You must be Ruby, I’m Aydin, the Captain asked me to give you his apologies.”

It wasn’t the fluent English that many residents of Baku seemed to speak, but it was understandable. Aydin was a local name, but the nervous looking young man in front of her, might easily have come from any number of local countries.

“Apologies ? He promised Jalil to meet me today.”

The lad behind him was looking at his shoes, a pair of worn out trainers.

“The captain did intend to meet you, but he had to see someone about an important cargo. He said to say it was good news for you, as we’ll definitely leave Baku the day after tomorrow.”

“I need to pee, can you ask him if they have a bathroom ?” Asked Sarah.

Ruby was going to ignore Sarah, but she knew that would quickly become impossible. Sarah was already doing her ‘I need to pee’ dance.

“We have a toilet, Yas can take your friend.”

“Thank you.” Answered Sarah.

Yas stopped looking at his shoes and he actually smiled at Sarah, she had that effect on everyone, not just young men. He led her off towards the rear of the ferry. Ruby wasn’t pleased that the captain had simply decided to go somewhere else, but she realised it wasn’t Aydin’s fault.

“So Aydin, why don’t you show us where we can store our things.”

“Yes of course Miss Ruby, this way.”

They descended a walkway into the body of the ship and it was hot, far hotter than the outside temperature. Aydin took Ruby and Spider to an area of the interior that looked cleaner than most and proudly opened a cabin door. Before he could show them inside, Sarah was back, a very upset Yas following her.

“I’ll wait until we get back to the hotel.” Said Sarah.

“Where did you take her ?” Asked Aydin.

“The guest toilet, the one near the captain’s lounge.”

Aydin looked at Ruby and smiled.

“That is the best we have and it’s kept clean.” He said.

“No problem, I’ll wait.” Said Sarah.

“You can’t wait for fourteen hours, you’ll burst something.” Said Spider.

It was then that Sarah looked inside the room that was intended as a lounge for all six of them and a place to store their bags of kit.

"There is a small kitchen with a gas ring and a kettle." Said Aydin.

He spoke as though he was showing them the best room at The Dorchester, but all Ruby saw was a stained mattress on a single bed and two rickety chairs. Someone had tried to give the room a lick of paint, but they hadn't managed to cover all the rust and rather worrying stains on the walls. The mattress on the bed had obviously given a long and useful life, probably it was some kind of family heirloom. Ruby couldn't imagine why anyone would hang onto it if it wasn't. One stain on it was definitely blood and Ruby itched just looking at it.

"We'll just put our kit in here and sit out on deck." Said Ruby.

"Bring your things on board as soon as you like." Said Aydin.

"Does the ferry ever stop further south than Turkmenbashi?" Asked Ruby.

Aydin was looking at her as if she was crazy, a look she was getting used to.

"No, of course not, it always stops there. There is nothing further south, apart from Iranian patrol boats."

Sarah was still doing her shuffle around that meant she wanted to use the toilet.

"You're certain you don't want to go here?" Asked Ruby.

"Yes, but can we hurry back to the hotel?"

"We might as well, we're obviously not seeing our gallant captain today."

Ruby said goodbye to Aydin and walked down the walkway and back onto the jetty. The steep angle made going down it far harder than going up, they all needed to hang onto the hand rails. At the bottom Sarah had a good look around.

"Good, no one around," she said, "keep an eye out, I'm going behind the old generator."

"Jeez Sarah, the loo on board couldn't have been that bad." Said Spider.

Ruby tried to ignore the fact that Sarah was squatting in broad daylight in a Muslim country and peeing on the public jetty. The process seemed to take a while, but nobody walked past and eventually a relieved looking Sarah walked back to them.

"Buckets." Said Spider.

"Huh?" Said Ruby.

"Buckets. I did a few months in Pentonville and there were four of us in a cell. Locked up for twenty hours out of every twenty four, all we had was a bucket. If we were really lucky they'd give us one with a lid."

Sarah's face lit up.

"I'd use a bucket, but it would have to have a lid..... and I'm not sharing it."

"Problem solved," said Ruby, "we'll get six buckets, with lids and chuck them overboard when we get to wherever we end up."

"They only stop at Turkmenbashi." Said Spider.

"We'll see Spider, we'll see. I might convince the captain to take a little diversion."

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Despite some misgivings, George had actually enjoyed the practise jump. The slow old transport plane had lowered the rear doors and he'd simply followed the others out. It had been easier following them, it gave him a point of reference, something solid to concentrate on. He'd looked down immediately after leaving the plane and regretted it, the beach below seemed close, too close. "All you can do is jump and hope that you land on something soft."

George had remembered Snowy's words and he'd ignore the ground rushing up and trusted the canopy to open. He actually closed his eyes at one point, only opening then as he heard the waves crashing onto the beach. He'd hit the sand and tumbled over, regaining his feet quite easily. One of the not-Terrys had actually landed in the sea and everyone had laughed. No one had twisted anything or even suffered a bad bruise. It had all been like a very expensive and fun fairground ride, all organised by Sir Edwin Fox. An old bus had been used to pick them up from the beach, an old bus that had reminded George of black and white films of World War two. It had added to the general holiday feeling and they'd arrived back at the camp in high spirits.

George was under no illusion that Foxy was doing it all to simply help an old friend. Ruby was becoming powerful and would make a good ally, if she chose to help the UK government. Whoever brought a powerful member of Das Geheimnis on board would probably do their career a lot of good. Foxy had a knighthood, but George guessed there must be other things he wanted. Politicians always seemed to have unlimited ambition and Foxy was definitely behaving like a politician.

"You must have the right friends, you're being moved to a secret location tonight and one that even I'm not allowed to know about." Said Snowy.

"I assumed we'd be flying from here."

"No, we're a good nine hours or more from the target, a bit of a stretch for the Russian plane you'll be using. Especially as I think the pilot wants to get home after dropping you off."

Snowy was smiling at him and helping his team repack their parachutes. It seemed to be something they did all the time, almost like a kind of therapy. All that George cared about was the 99.98% of canopies that fully opened.

"No mid-air refuelling?" Asked George.

George knew it was a daft question and they both laughed. At a different time and in a different place, he'd have invited Snowy to share a couple of pints at the local pub.

"Any ideas where we're going?" He asked.

"Not exactly, but it's somewhere only two hours flying time from your drop point. It appears your target has a definite date to leave where she is now."

George felt happy for the first time in days. If someone had seen Ruby and knew she was on the way, then she had to be alive.

"Who told you, have they seen her?"

Snowy held up his hands and stepped back a pace.

"Hold on George, I only know what London chooses to tell me. I didn't even know the target was a she until London mentioned it."

"I'm sorry, the past few days have been quite tense."

"All I know is that the UK has a few arrangements with countries not usually seen as allies. We land a plane at one of their military bases and they get a few favours in return. All hush, hush and definitely not for the public to know about. You'll be landing at such a place and I really have no idea where it is."

George watched Sarge take about his hundredth leap from the six foot wall. Knees together, perfect roll, they'd all spent days at it. It finally sounded as though the training was going to be put to use.

"Do we get another practise drop?" Asked George.

"No, you fly out late tonight and your next drop will be into Turkmenistan."

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Max hated wearing a suit and the tie was an added annoyance. No matter how he sat, the damn tie seemed to make his shirt collar dig into his neck. He'd have dearly loved to have ripped off the tie

and thrown away the suit jacket. Captain Jafarov would have found that strange though and he wanted the good captain to like him.

"I'm paying a lot of money captain," said Max, "you're certain you can get my urgent packages to Turkmenbashi on time?"

Captain Jafarov was no fool, he'd been carrying various types of freight across the Caspian for over twenty years, Max had done his homework. The captain knew that anyone willing to pay five times the going rate had something to hide, but the money was oh, so tempting.

"Yes Mr Leitner, I can. I was going to wait an extra day or so, but I've already started the procedures to leave Baku harbour. There are of course expenses involved in.... oiling the wheels of local bureaucracy."

Max understood, in fact he was relying on the greed of Captain Jafarov, part owner and captain of the Night Princess. He'd chosen to carry on using the Otto Leitner alias, which was sloppy, but he'd needed a name for the captain and it seemed as good as any. He took an envelope full of twenty dollar bills out of his inside jacket pocket and slid it across the table.

"Of course, I understand and please accept this to reimburse you for any extra expenses."

The captain liked money, he looked at the envelope the way most people look at their partners, or those they're having an affair with.

"I hope I haven't lost you any passengers, by insisting you leave port a little early?"

"No, not at all. Most of my income is from freight. I have a girl and her friends, a party of six. They paid well, unlike the other ten or so assorted riff raff who'll get in the way and moan about the toilets until we get to Turkmenbashi."

Max stood up and prepared to leave the small office where Baku Maritime Transportation had its head office, customer services and where they even sold tickets, if anyone was ever persistent enough to find the office.

"Will you be travelling with your cargo?" Asked Captain Jafarov.

"No, I'll be travelling by other means, but my people will be waiting for the container to arrive in Turkmenbashi."

More smiles and more promises of large sums for future consignments, provided the current container arrived unopened and its contents intact. It was all a game to Max, the container would be full of second hand furniture. Anything to give it a bit of weight, to add authenticity.

"Until next time." Max Said.

He got into the waiting Taxi, he was still using Ali to drive him around.

"Everything go ok boss?" Asked Ali.

"Yes, word will spread that the Night Princess is leaving port early because of an expensive cargo. No one will be surprised when it's attacked by pirates."

Ali was just driving, he'd never even asked him where he wanted to go. The Russian ex-soldier had become quite good at sensing his moods and knew he just wanted to sit in the back of the taxi and think.

"I know a good guy who can come with you, the pirates are dangerous. Most of them are religious crazies. They all think they'll go to heaven if they can sink enough boats and collect enough money."

Max chuckled, he quite liked the straight forward and slightly crazy way that Ali looked at the world.

"No, I'll go on my own and you can travel with the container as we arranged. Wait until the pirates attack and then begin killing the passengers. Not the girl though, not Ruby. I'll take care of her personally."

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Ruby had been telling Serge how surprised she was that they'd had their final dinner in the hotel, without one solitary unpleasant incident. No visit from the police about Sarah wearing a mini skirt to the shops, or an irate hotel manager asking her to pay for the things Spider had stolen. Her mind had been full of the various scenarios that could have played out, but none had. They'd all gathered for a final dinner at The Marriott and then a bottle of champagne.

"To a safe trip." She'd said.

They'd all joined in with the toast and seemed almost happy to be leaving the next day. The Night Princess was a bed bug infested nightmare, but it was taking them to the next part of their adventure. Ruby had spoken to the reception desk about checking out early the next morning and then she'd enjoyed sex with Serge. Nothing too athletic or too prolonged, just enough to give them both a good night's sleep. At about 1am the phone had rung;

"Ruby, it's Jalil."

"Yes, what's the problem? Is there a problem with the ferry?"

"No Ruby, it's your friend Spider. I have a few friends in the local police and would seem that he's been admitted to City Hospital, with a gunshot wound."

Serge was now fully awake and sitting on the edge of the bed, trying to understand what was going on from one side of the conversation.

"Spider's been shot! How is he Jalil?"

"I have no idea, it was just good luck that a police officer I know was on duty tonight. I can come over and drive you there, if you'd like?"

"No, but thank you. I'll get a taxi from outside the hotel."

As often happened at times of real stress, her mind felt clear, she had a lot of things to organise.

"Spider is in the hospital with a gunshot wound. Could you please get the others out of bed and dressed?"

"Yes of course."

Serge pulled on his boxer shorts and a gown and left the room. Ruby used the time to pull a large bundle of dollars from her case, more than enough to cover their hotel bill. There could be nothing to draw attention to them, no curious loose ends for the police to follow. They'd pay their bill and checkout, just like any other group of tourists. Olga was the first to arrive, still pushing her long blonde hair out of her eyes.

"Sarah has gone too." She said.

"Of course she has, they just couldn't resist a last night on the town," said Ruby, "it's my fault, I should have seen it coming."

Leo came back with Serge, both of them looking as though they really needed a few hours more sleep.

"Serge and I will go to City Hospital and see how Spider is. While I'm gone I want you two to pack for all of us, every room, every pair of dirty socks."

Leo and Olga just nodded at her and Ruby handed the pile of dollars to Olga.

"There's more than enough there to pay our bill. When you have everything packed, check out and drive the cars to the Ferry, park as close as you can."

"We've never been there." Said Olga.

Ruby found a map of Baku at the back of one of the tourist flyers that seemed to cover the coffee table in her room. She marked a spot that looked to be in the middle of the docks.

"It's there and you will get lost, even I did. Just get checked out and wait for us there, you'll find it eventually."

“Suppose you need us ?” Asked Leo.

“Serge and I can check how Spider is doing. Nothing stops us leaving on the Ferry though, I’ll leave Spider and Sarah in Baku, if I have to.”

Ruby dressed in the bathroom, putting on the first things she found and ignoring any thought of things matching. On an impulse she found the card Sanjar had given her and called the number, he had said to call at any time of day.

“Sanjar ? Yes, this is Ruby..... yes the girl you took to Bilgah. A friend is injured and in City Hospital, can you..... yes the Marriott.... Thank you.”

“He’ll be outside in ten minutes.” She told Serge.

Serge had done worse than her in finding clothes and had on the same jeans she’d seen him in two days before. Together they took the lift down to reception and went outside, to wait for Sanjar and his taxi to arrive. It was twelve minutes, not ten, but Ruby forgave him as the old London black cab pulled up outside.

“I know the hospital,” said Sanjar, “we can be there in no time.”

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Sarah hadn’t intended for things to go so crazy, but who would plan a night with their partner shot and then end up hiding from the gang who shot him. Her hand was covered in blood and for about the tenth time she panicked until she remembered it wasn’t her blood... it was Spider’s. He’d told her to run, so she had, though she hadn’t needed much encouragement.

“Fucking drugs again, you stupid bitch.” She scolded herself.

She’d dressed properly, long flowing dress and a nice respectable head scarf. Now the scarf was gone and the dress was ripped and blood stained, again not her blood. The drugs had helped her escape, given her blind courage and the ability to ignore the shots they’d fired at her. She had no idea if Spider was dead, but she assumed he was. She cried and once again the drugs made it hard for her to remember, hard to concentrate on what had happened.

“What did those bastards sell me ?” She muttered.

She’d wanted a bit of fairy dust, just enough cocaine to light up the night a bit. No harm in that, everyone she knew in London used a bit for those special occasions, it was cheaper than Ganga these days and didn’t leave you wanting to eat four pizzas. A taxi driver had dropped them off somewhere in the north of the city and pointed at a gang of guys in a car park.

“They have what you’re looking for.” He’d said.

Spider had even given him a twenty dollar tip ! Then all hell had broken loose. Perhaps the gang thought they were cops ? Her mind did another flip and Sarah vomited onto the last clean bit of her long flowing cream coloured dress. It hadn’t been coke and she’d known right away, coke never made her head spin like that.

“Oh fuck, it was my fault !” She yelled across the empty street.

She was sat in an office doorway in a street that no one had walked down in over an hour. It seemed safe and she had no intention of moving until Ruby came to get her, which she knew she would.

Sarah remembered knowing they’d given her something bad and her hand had gone for the small automatic in her bag. She’d only intended to frighten them into giving her money back. Over confidence or stupidity, she’d actually tried to pull a gun on half a dozen street thugs.

“Come and get me Ruby.” She muttered into the night.

They shot Spider before her gun had cleared the bag and he’d told her to run. Sarah had run, ignoring the bullets hitting the cars she ran past, hitting a shop window and turning it into tiny cubes of glass. Sarah shifted herself and cursed the thing that kept biting her back, perhaps it was a hornet



? She felt her shoulder and stretched, running her fingers over her shoulder blade. The hornet was instantly joined by a dozen angry friends and when she looked at her hand, it was covered in blood, this time hers. Sarah was crying so much, that the tears made the sign over the road look blurry, something advertising a new shopping centre.

“Oh please Ruby, come and get me !”

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Ruby knew Spider was alive as soon as the taxi pulled up outside the hospital.

“Can you wait for us ? We may need you all night.”

“Yes of course Ruby, I hope your friend isn’t too badly injured.” Said Sanjar.

Ruby walked into the reception area and didn’t need to ask where Spider was, or whatever alias he might have given them. She could feel him, like a huge beacon of pain, anger and something else.

Guilt, yes guilt, Spider knew he’d done something incredibly stupid.

“He’s alive and in a bed on the third floor.” She told Serge.

“Any sign of Sarah ?”

“She’s not in the hospital.”

They took the stairs as a large queue of worried looking Japanese tourists were waiting for the lift. Casualty was the same anywhere in the world, worried people hoping their friends and relatives were alive and well. Ruby found the room where Spider was playing with the tube to a Cannula that had been stuck in his arm.

“Ruby I.....” He started to say.

“Don’t you dare tell me you’ve done something silly. You’ve completely fucked up Rupert Bailey. Now tell me, where is Sarah ?”

“I don’t know, we got a taxi north, I remember a building site for a new shopping centre. She wanted something to make the night a bit special, I should have stopped her.”

Ruby remembered trying to stop Sarah doing something silly and failing. She felt kinder towards Spider and kissed his cheek.

“How are you doing Spider ?”

He had on a hospital gown that didn’t go quite far enough round him to be tied up. He pulled it loose and showed her a large bandage just above his hip bone.

“Clean through, they could probably use the bullet again. Didn’t hit anything major, but it hurt like hell. I feel a bit of a fool for passing out, but it stopped them putting any more bullets in me.”

“Was it Max and his Russians ?”

“No, no, nothing like that. For some reason Sarah pulled a gun on them, I’ve still no idea why. It was the street dealers who shot me.”

Ruby felt relieved, she’d much rather be looking for a scared Sarah, without having to worry about Max waiting in ambush.

“Was Sarah shot ?” She asked.

“I don’t know, I was out cold.”

Ruby pulled his gown a bit further away from his bandage and it didn’t look too bad. Ruby was no expert, but he wasn’t being given blood and the Cannula just seemed to be putting a fluid into him, to keep him hydrated.

“Are you fit enough to leave ?” She asked.

“Leave where ?”

She could feel pain in his mind and confusion as he looked at the tube stuck in his arm. Ruby looked at her watch and it was later than she’d realised.

“Spider, it’s your choice,” she said, “you can check yourself out and join me. The ferry leaves in under five hours and I intend to be on it. But it has to be your decision. So I’ll ask you again, are you well enough to leave ?”

“Can I just leave, will they let me ?”

“Of course you can, any crap and I’ll threaten to call the French embassy.” Said Serge.

“He’s British.” Said Ruby.

“Then I’ll threaten them with both embassies, that’ll scare them.”

Spider had his legs over the edge of the bed, though he still looked to be in quite a bit of pain.

“You get me on board that ferry and I’ll go.” He said.

“Serge will stay and help you check out and get you to the Night Princess.”

They were both looking at her oddly now, especially Serge.

“You can’t look for Sarah on your own.” He said.

“Yes I can, Spider needs you more than I do. Sanjar knows the city like the back of his hand and I’m not without a few tricks to keep myself safe. Get Spider out of here and onto the ferry, even if you have to smuggle him out.”

She left before either of them could argue. She found Sanjar waiting in his taxi and asked him to drive north.

“Take me to any new shopping centres being built in the north of the city.”

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It was hopeless, most of Baku seemed to be in the process of construction and they’d criss-crossed much of the north of the city. Sanjar pulled his taxi up in an empty street and looked back at Ruby.

“Baku city covers eight hundred and twenty square miles Ruby,” he said, “have you any clues other than her being near some sort of construction ?”

Ruby tried to feel Sarah, but she was getting nothing, just the occasional feeling of being alone, but nothing to home in on. She spotted the framework of a building, something which had gone beyond being just a steel frame, but had yet to be finished.

“I need to get up high, wait here for me.”

He didn’t of course, Ruby heard him lock the taxi and come running after her. There was a security guard on the site, but she gave him one of her smiles. Adoration, unconditional love and much more besides, all delivered straight into the deepest part of his mind, maybe even into his soul. He helped her get the construction elevator going and even joined them on their trip to the top floor.

“It’ll be the tallest building in the north of the city,” he told them, “you can see the entire city from up here, on a clear night.”

It was a clear night and there was a wind that blew through the empty frames, where one day there’d be glass. Ruby carefully stepped over pieces of plaster board and a few tools, discarded by the construction crew. She’d never been that keen on heights, but she knew that Sarah was in trouble and needed her.

“Be quiet now,” she said, “I need to concentrate.”

Ruby decided on a spot only about two feet from the edge. The wind was cold and she folded her long skirt around herself as she sat on the dirty floor tiles. One day a prestigious company would call the office its home, but now it looked squalid and dangerous. She closed her eyes and let the noise of the wind take away her fears and tension. There was a noise somewhere that she needed to concentrate on, the sound of a crying woman.

“Have you got a pen, either of you ?”

The security guard removed a biro from the top pocket of his immaculate uniform jacket and handed it to her. She concentrated again and felt the pain Sarah was experiencing and most of it wasn't physical. The drug she'd taken had done something to her mind, something that went beyond the normal confusion from being drunk or high. It made it hard to keep inside her head and Ruby kept finding herself forced out and unable to find Sarah again.

"I have her!" She shouted.

Neither of her companions said anything and Ruby remembered telling them to be quiet. She'd only used a tiny amount of compulsion, would they remain silent forever, unless she allowed them to speak again? She cleared the thought from her mind and looked through Sarah's eyes, seeing the street, the cars parked quite near her and..... the two men searching the doorway only twenty yards away. Then out of the corner of Sarah's eye she saw the sign about the construction of a new shopping centre and at the corner of the poster was a company logo.

"Alright you can talk now, do either of you know this sign?"

The logo in black biro looked quite good to her, she just hoped it wasn't used all over the city.

"I know that," said Sanjar, "they're building some new shops and offices, only two streets away."

"Good, we need to hurry."

They went down in the elevator and Ruby ran to the taxi, the security guard stopping a few feet away.

"Do you have a gun?" She asked.

As an answer he undid a buckle and removed a very new looking Glock from a holster.

"Good, you're coming too."

Sanjar knew his city well and it really was only two streets away. Ruby recognised the sign and the parked cars that Sarah had been staring at. The taxi stopped and Ruby was out of the back and running towards two men who were chuckling and pointing at something in a shop doorway. It was dark, but she saw one man raise a gun and aim it at a bundle on the ground, a bundle that was Sarah.

"Stop!" Shouted Ruby.

His friend looked her way, but the guy with the gun ignored her. Ruby didn't hesitate, she burned his hand to ashes in a fraction of a second. She poured so much heat into him that the gun he'd been carrying exploded, taking his hand right off. Before she could deal with the second gang member, she heard two shots fired and the man fell to the ground. She stopped running when she reached Sarah and realised her friend was still alive.

"Thank you," she said to the security guard, "It was all a dream, you can go back to your building now."

He holstered his gun and walked away without saying a word. Sanjar was looking at her a bit strangely, but he hadn't run away, which was a good sign.

"Ruby, I knew you'd come for me." Said Sarah.

"What have you done to yourself now?"

She looked Sarah over and then noticed the blood on the back of her dress. Ruby felt the wound, making Sarah yell.

"You'll live, it's only shallow. I think you collided with something sharp, it's not a bullet wound."

Sanjar helped without being asked and they half carried Sarah to the taxi and put her in the back.

The taxi driver didn't even complain about them getting blood on his immaculate leather upholstery. Ruby held Sarah's face, making sure she had her full attention.

“Not enough time to think about it Sarah, you have to decide now. Come with me on the ferry or I can drop you off at the hospital. Which is it to be ?”

It was unfair, she could see her friends eyes weren't focusing properly and she'd stopped looking into Sarah's mind, it was just too messy in there. Ruby almost hated Sarah at that moment. Hated her for going crazy again, getting herself into trouble again, leading Spider into danger again. Most of all she hated her for forcing her to be so ruthless, but there just wasn't time to get Sarah to a doctor and make it to the ferry on time.

“With you.”

“Clearer, you want to go on the ferry ?”

“Yes bitch, you heard. I'm coming with you.”

Ruby smiled, there wasn't much wrong with Sarah that a bandage and a decent night's sleep wouldn't cure.

“One last favour.” She said to Sanjar.

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Olga was the first to run down the walkway and help her get Sarah out of the taxi. Leo appeared a few seconds later and he actually lifted Sarah into his arms and carried her up and onto the deck of the ferry. Ruby rummaged in her bag and gave Sanjar a handful of five hundred Euro notes, enough to make him moderately rich, for a Baku taxi driver. She kissed him on the lips.

“Get home and forget me Sanjar.”

She got out of the taxi and ran up the walkway, hearing the familiar sound of a London taxi driving away into the night.

“We tried to make a comfortable chair for her.” Said Serge.

Some cushions had been added to one of the fold up chairs and Sarah did look comfortable, once Leo had helped her position a few cushions in places that hurt. Spider was asleep, fast asleep on his own foldup chair, still attached to a drip, which Serge must have liberated from the hospital.

“I gave him something to help him sleep.” Said Aydin.

The young crew member had a large first aid tin in his hands, which he gave to Ruby.

“It's not unusual to carry wounded passengers, there's even a trauma bandage in there. Do you know how to use the kit ?”

“Yes, thank you Aydin.”

“Good. The captain is aboard and we'll leave port in two and a half hours.”

Sarah cried, screamed and complained as Olga and Ruby undressed her, cleaned her up and dressed her wounds. She'd suffered no serious injuries and by the time the sun had risen and the ferry was leaving port; she was fast asleep on deck.

“You know that neither of them will be fit for much when we arrive in Turkmenbashi.” Said Olga.

“Did Spider split his stitches ?” Asked Ruby.

“No, but he'll need help just walking.”

“I'll worry about that when we get to the other side of the Caspian Sea.”

She checked on Spider and then walked to the ship's side, leaning on the rail to watch Baku as they slowly sailed away. Serge joined her and she leant against him, appreciating the closeness.

“Many other passengers ?” She asked.

“A few students, the usual type seeking adventures in unusual places. Two guys are scouting ahead of some car rally and there's a guard who's looking after a container. We haven't seen much of him, sounds Russian.”

They all sounded harmless enough and Ruby hoped they had at least fourteen hours to relax and prepare. She had no intention of letting the ferry go to Turkmenbashi, but she'd wait a while before telling her exhausted friends. They were, at last, headed for Turkmenistan.

"There is one problem that will cause a lot of trouble when Sarah wakes up." Said Serge.

She felt so relaxed that she was almost sleeping stood at the rail.

"What's that?"

"Spider had the boxes with the toilet buckets and they were left at the hotel."

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