

Ruby

Chapter 7 – The Carpathians

“The most dangerous place on earth. Don’t worry Kurt, I can be strong.”

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They were halfway through their second day in the Carpathian Mountains and the snow was heavy enough to form small drifts against the occasional stone wall they passed. Not that they were actually up in the mountains, they were following roads and tracks that would hopefully take them along valleys and through low mountain passes.

“It’s very picturesque,” said Sarah, “as long as it doesn’t block our progress.”

“I hate snow.” Said Spider.

Olga had nearly come to blows with Sarah and that was after just three hours driving in the van with her. After stopping for lunch at a petrol station in the middle of nowhere, Olga had re-organised the seating arrangements. All she really did was re-assemble the original groups. Olga was in the van with Andrei and Sarah was in the back seat of the merc with Ruby. Spider was now driving the old Merc and judging by his comments, he was becomingly increasingly fed up with driving in the snow.

“Olga is flashing the van lights.” Said Ruby.

Spider had been ignoring the buzzing phone in his pocket, but he brought the merc to a halt and pulled the phone out of his pocket.

“What’s the problem ?” He asked.

He listened and began drumming the fingers of his left hand on the dashboard. Ruby had seen Spider get angry before and she knew the warning signs.

“If I go any slower we won’t get out of these mountains until summer !” He shouted.

He listened again and then disconnected the call and threw the phone onto the empty passenger seat. Spider turned and looked over the top of his seat.

“It appears I’m going too fast. I’ll be keeping to no more than twenty miles an hour from now on.”

He glared at them, as if daring Sarah and Ruby to disagree.

“Fine.” Said Ruby.

Sarah seemed about to say something, but Ruby grabbed her hand and dug her nails into her palm. Sarah gave a slight squeal, but she didn’t argue with Spider. He put the car back in gear and drove around a bend in the road and in front of them was a long road that descended the hillside in a seemingly endless series of curves. It was the sort of road you’d see in an advert for cars, the sort of road you’d love on a bright and dry summer day. In the winter, with the covering of snow, it looked lethal.

“Oh for fuck sake.” Muttered Spider.

The merc was heavy and low and although it slipped on the corners, it felt sure footed. The van behind them was a different matter and it skidded badly on every curve. Ruby was looking through the rear window when the van didn’t quite make a turn.

“Stop Spider, they’re off the road.”

Spider brought the car to a slow stop and turned the front wheels towards the side of the road. He applied the handbrake.

“They had to pick a steep bit of the road,” he said, “I’ll leave the car here for now and reverse back if they need pulling back onto the road.”

Spider did up his coat and pulled the hood over his head before opening the door. He opened the car door and the sound of his feet crunching in the snow could be heard as he walked back to the van.

"I'm going too." Said Ruby.

"Don't leave me here on my own."

"Then come with me."

Ruby hated the cold, but she didn't want to simply sit and wait for Spider to come back. She stepped from the car and was pleased to see Sarah get out of her side. The wind was biting; the wind chill felt like it was cutting into Ruby's cheeks. She pulled up the hood on her coat and crunched over the fresh covering of snow. She noticed Sarah didn't have gloves.

"Put your hands in your pockets, it's cold enough for frost bite."

The van was at a slight angle and everyone was stood in the shallow roadside ditch. Andrei was looking at the rear wheels of the van and shaking his head.

"We need to get some traction," said Spider, "we can put branches under it and ram them tight under the wheel."

"Can I help?" Asked Ruby.

"Get an axe from Olga and start cutting branches off the trees," Said Spider.

Even Sarah helped, ignoring her freezing hands and carrying large amounts of branches and bushes back to the van. Spider rammed everything under the back wheel of the van and stamped it home with his feet.

"In the army we had to get a personnel carrier out of a ditch by doing this." He said.

Olga got in the driving seat and very carefully let out the clutch. Everyone pushed hard on the back of the van and it rose up onto the road. They were all cheering as Olga drove the van level with the merc and parked it in the middle of the road.

"Next time we'll get it back on the road quicker." Said Spider.

"Next time?!" Said Sarah.

"He's right, we may need to do this a few times before we leave the mountains." Said Andrei.

Spider took over as driver for the van and Sarah jumped in beside him. Ruby wasn't about to argue, Andrei knew the route better than Spider and Olga was less irritating company. They reached the end of the last bend and in front of them was a long straight road that followed a small river along the base of a valley. The view was stunning.

"I know a quarry where we can spend the night." Said Andrei.

"Another drafty wooden hut?" Asked Ruby.

Andrei shook his head.

"No, a trailer where they normally store equipment."

"I might sleep in the car."

"No, you'll freeze to death." Said Olga.

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Max was in no danger of freezing in the luxury villa his office had rented for him in Varna. Close enough to the city so that his team could keep an eye on the DGSE agents, but far enough out of town to give some privacy. Everyone was spying on everyone, but in a very civilised way. Serge and Roland were in a cheapo dive by the waterfront and Cynthia took a look at them about twice a day.

"Serge actually had a visit from a local hooker." Cynthia had told him.

Roland too had been visiting them, parking close by and walking by the house. It showed a certain mutual respect, it meant they considered each other to be worth watching. Cynthia had arranged for

them to know if the merc or the old van showed up in Bucharest, but Max knew they'd stay away from large cities.

"They'll stick to the mountains and the woods," he'd told Cynthia, "we'll see them arrive in Varna in three or four days."

So they waited and watched and the DGSE watched them. There had been a development that had added another note to computer records on Ruby and her gang. A young Turkish boy and a local thug had both died in what at first glance looked like just another race fuelled street fight. The reason the DGSE computer had flagged it as interesting, was because a girl seen with the dead Turk bore an uncanny resemblance to Sarah Simmons. Of course Max's contact had informed him of the computer's notion that Ruby and her people had in some way been involved in the deaths. The Budapest police weren't concerned, nor was anyone really worried about two deaths that seemed drug or gang related. Max though was worried that it just added more noise to the system and someone high up in any one of half a dozen intelligence organisations would think Ruby deserved looking at.

"Eventually they'll make enough waves in the system to get them noticed." He'd told Cynthia.

"Have you told George?" She asked.

"I haven't told George anything. As far as he's concerned Ruby is leisurely making her way across Europe and we're following her."

"Why are you lying to him?"

"Because he'll send his people to look for her and that means more known faces coming to Varna and more data on computers. Eventually the Americans and the Russians will decide to investigate and then all hell will break loose."

~ ~

George Polandrous knew Max wasn't telling him the truth, his other sources of intelligence had told him so. George didn't have networks of agents, but he did have very deep pockets and most intelligence organisations leak like sieves. He opened an encrypted email and looked at a digital copy of the information Serge had received in a sealed envelope only a day before. It had taken a special courier and a diplomatic bag to get the file to Serge, but George merely opened a large ZIP file. His hand shook as he dialled Carlos on his mobile.

"There's something I need you to see. Not something that I'm happy to send, so you'll need to come into the office."

George listened to Carlos moaning about traffic and the time it would take to make the journey. He tuned him out and looked at some of the pictures in the DGSE file and nearly vomited.

"I don't care how late you get here Carlos, I'll be here all night."

More moans about getting home again afterwards.

"It's Ruby Carlos, this looks very bad."

On hearing it concerned Ruby, Carlos had simply promised to be in the office by 1am. George wasn't sure if his feelings for Ruby would help or hinder him finding her, but it definitely gave him motivation. George looked at the map included in the file and decided against sending Carlos to Varna. The map had a large red circle around an area on the Bulgarian black sea coast, not far from the Turkish border.

"That's where she'll go." He muttered.

George was delighted with his decision, his people could even fly into Istanbul and cross the border into Bulgaria from there. By now everyone would be watching passenger lists in and out of Varna.

His PA was still in the office, Penny had her faults, but she usually sensed when something big was going on. He pressed the number for her extension.

"I'm sending Carlos to Istanbul and he'll need to take two good people with him. Heavy hitters, people with good weapons skills. Look through who's available and bring in their files."

George read more of the file and if it had come from any other source he'd have thought it was a huge joke. But in a way it confirmed a few things he'd always suspected. There were more pictures, some of bodies only vaguely recognisable as human.

"Sorry Penny, can you look up who we can buy heavy weapons from in Istanbul.... Yes heavy weapons."

~ ~

Ruby had been half asleep when Andrei had braked the merc and sworn under his breath. They hadn't seen another car or living soul on the road for hours, yet in front of them was a well-organised roadblock.

"I don't think they're after us," said Olga, "it looks like a permanent roadblock, they probably just want money."

The bandits had chosen the perfect place. A long and harmless looking road snaked through a small group of about four buildings and by the time you got to the roadblock, simply reversing back was impossible. They'd used an old open back truck as the main roadblock, complete with straw bales in the back and oil drum lids fixed to the side as armour. Two armed men were stood on the back of the truck, while one man on the road was aiming a huge revolver at them and smiling.

"We haven't seen any other cars," said Ruby, "who do they stop?"

"They only need one decent payoff a day," said Andrei, "this group of bandits will feed their families and most of the village on that."

Village ! Ruby looked out of the window and found it hard to think of three or four dilapidated houses as a village. By now the van was pulling up behind them and there was no signal on Ruby's cell-phone.

"Spider won't realise this is just a local money making scheme." Said Ruby.

"What do you mean?" Asked Olga.

"His unit were ambushed when he was in the army. It was different people in a very different part of the world. But to Spider this will be the same thing happening again."

"Shit !" Shouted Olga.

She was out of the car and waving at Spider, trying to show him there was no real threat.

"Spider No !" She yelled.

It was no use. Spider had been having a love affair with an AK47, ever since they'd begun the journey. He carried it everywhere, it had pride of place on the van floor next to him. He opened the van door and fired a short burst at the truck being used to block the road. The 7.62 rounds from the AK47 ripped through the old truck like a can opener. Spider didn't hit anyone, it's unlikely he meant to. Several of the oil drum lids flew off the truck and one of its rear tyres burst, making a sound like a grenade going off.

"No ! We mean no harm." Shouted Andrei.

He held his hands up to the man holding the revolver and Ruby watched in horror as the man fired twice. One bullet missed Andrei, but the second hit him on the hip and he fell to the ground. Olga had her door open and was hiding behind it and aiming her pistol at the bandit who'd just shot Andrei.

'Run Ruby, run !'

The male voice was in her head and it was insistent. Ruby opened the rear door of the car and ran into the wood on that side of the road. Behind her she could hear the occasional single round being fired, but not the angry bark of Spider's beloved AK47.

'Get behind a tree Ruby, Spider will fire it soon.'

She'd run in a semi-circle and she was now opposite the bandit's truck. Two men were in the back, hiding behind oil drum lids and bales of hay. As Ruby watched, one of them fired a rifle, but his shot didn't seem aimed. From where she was, Ruby couldn't see the merc or the bandit who'd shot Andrei.

'Ruby, listen to me, please. You have to get behind some cover.'

The voice was insistent and she trusted it. Of course someone wanting to mislead her would probably sound just as honest, but they'd be unlikely to encourage her to take cover. The second bandit on the back of the truck had seen her and was waving in her direction and shouting to someone she couldn't see. Ruby jumped behind a very solid looking tree, just as the whole world seemed to explode.

'You need to move, they're not all dead.'

"Who's dead?" She screamed.

Her own voice seemed distant, her ears were still recovering from the deafening explosion. Were her friends dead? Ruby moved from behind the tree and the truck had become a tangle of buckled and burning metal. She'd seen some terrible things in the minds of others, but seeing the torso of a bandit with no legs or head made her want to vomit.

'No Ruby, not that way. Run, hide!'

She ignored the voice, she had to know if her friends were still alive. Ruby walked out of the trees and she could see both the bandits who'd been on the truck had been literally blown apart. She'd never seen an RPG explosion, she deliberately ignored the continually media coverage of wars in the Middle East. This was her first personal experience of the horrors of war and the devastation from the firing of a single weapon staggered her.

"Olga, Sarah. Are you ok?" She shouted.

The front of the merc looked undamaged. It had a covering of dirt and straw, but it had been far enough away to avoid the explosion. Ruby noticed movement out of the corner of her eye and a bandit was observing the wreckage. He turned and observed her.

"I'm sorry." She said.

It was inadequate, of course it was inadequate, but it was all she could think of saying. He looked to be the boss, the person the bandit on the truck had been shouting at. He looked about fifty and he was wearing a worn out suit. It had probably been his roadblock and his people. For all she knew he was probably the village leader and Spider and his RPG had wiped out half of his village.

"He was ambushed once you see, he lost a lot of friends."

Ruby realised she'd been speaking to him in English, but she hoped her tone had sounded soothing. He had an Uzi on a strap over his shoulder. It was highly polished and was obviously his Sunday best weapon, for show and status rather than killing. He aimed the weapon at her and fired.

The Israelis call the Uzi the room clearer. The bandit obviously wasn't used to firing it and he turned as he fired. Most of the burst of bullets went into the woods, but he managed to hit Ruby with three of them. She looked down and saw three holes in her jacket. She hadn't been blown off her feet, she knew that only happened in bad TV movies.

"I'm dying, he's killed me." She thought.

One bullet in each lung and one that must have hit her heart, yet she was still conscious as she fell forward onto the road. She saw the bandit turn and fire another burst from the weapon in the direction of her friends. Ruby felt a sense of relief, they must still be alive if he was firing at them.

'Oh Ruby, too soon. You should have been among us when you gained understanding.'

She was watching her friends as if in a dream. Andrei was on the ground, but she could feel his heart was still beating. Olga had a gash on her arm, but nothing serious. It should have been impossible to see the van from where she lay, but she could see that Sara was actually armed and hiding behind the Merc. Spider was the problem, he was getting another RPG round from the back of the van. No, there had been enough deaths, including hers. She was on her feet now and looking at the body of a girl who looked just like her, it was her ! How pathetic she looked with her clothes full of holes and blood staining her jacket.

'Last chance Ruby. You need to do this on your own.'

Ruby coughed and sat up, her chest hurt more than the worst toothache she could remember. She undid her jacket and her blouse was covered in blood, the dark red kind. Standing up wasn't easy, but she managed it and the boss bandit was still stood in front of her. One foot in front of the other very slowly and she was only four feet or so away from him by the time he saw her.

"Ruby, get away from him." She heard Spider shouting.

The boss bandit looked terrified, especially when he saw the blood covering her blouse.

"It's not your fault, it's not our fault. But let it end now." She said.

He began to lift the muzzle of the Uzi and then his head exploded. Ruby assumed one of her friends had shot him and turned towards them as they ran towards her.

"What were you doing ?" Asked Sarah.

Spider was carrying his browning and was busy watching the houses nearby for any further bandits.

"You've been shot." Said Olga.

Olga pulled her jacket to one side and pulled her blouse up to look at her chest. There was a lot of congealing blood, but not a mark on her flesh.

"This doesn't make sense Ruby, where did he shoot you ?"

"I think he must have missed me."

It was a silly answer, but Spider had been staring at her breasts and she just wanted to cover herself with her jacket. Spider was looking at the dead boss bandit and picking up his Uzi.

"Who shot him ?" Asked Ruby.

"None of us," said Olga, "we assumed you had."

Spider was examining the pool of blood, brains and bone fragments that had been the man's head.

"I've never seen a weapon that could do this," said Spider, "his head looks to have been blown apart from the inside, yet there isn't a mark on his suit."

"Did you do this to him Ruby ?" Asked Olga.

"I don't honestly know. How is Andrei ?"

"Oh shit ! Andrei !"

Olga ran back to the merc and Andrei was covered by one of the rusty steel wheel arches from the blown up truck. It might have saved his life, as the surface had several clean spots where bullets had glanced off it. Andrei swore at them as they lifted him up and leant him against the rear wheel of the merc.

"I'm ok," he said, "it went right through the muscle and out the other side. It hurts like hell though."

Ruby and her blood stained blouse were forgotten as Olga cleaned and bandaged Andrei's wounds.

Spider still kept one eye on the houses, but he began to examine the damage to their vehicles.

“Two bullet holes in the merc and neither have done any damage to anything essential,” he said, “and one side window shattered on the van. All in all we got off pretty lightly.”

“Can we fix it ?” Asked Sarah.

“A bit of duct tape over the bullet holes and some tarpaulin wrapped over the window frame and we’ll be as good as new, or as good as these vehicles ever were.”

As Olga was helping Andrei into the van they all clearly heard the sound of a wailing woman coming from one of the houses.

“We should be going,” said Olga, “they’re likely to have friends in the area. We can do our running repairs a few miles down the road.”

Olga drove the van and Ruby ended up in the back seat of the merc with Sarah. Spider drove carefully around the destroyed truck and they waited until the van had successfully driven past the remains of the roadblock. The snow seemed to be thinning, so Spider drove fast, with Olga easily keeping up with him.

“Ruby, did you really kill that bandit ?” Asked Sarah.

“I might have I don’t know. It might have been the man who told me to run.”

“What man ?”

Ruby told Sarah everything that had happened to her at the road block. She’d promised to tell them the truth and she did, every bit of it. Even if it did make her sound insane. Sarah listened with her mouth open and Spider heard every word as he drove.

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Serge gave the hooker’s right buttock a playful squeeze, but she didn’t wake up. Of course she might have been pretending to be asleep. She’d been very good at her chosen profession, so Serge wasn’t about to complain if she wanted a break. He got up and sat at the table in his room dressed only in a pair of boxer shorts. The file that had caused him to question so much was in the case on the table.

“I’ll pay you extra to do that again.”

Nothing, not even a twitch. He’d never known a hooker who refused extra money and he’d known quite a few. Natalie was genuinely asleep, if Natalie was her real name and if he was remembering it right. Serge rummaged for the key in the pocket of his jacket as it hung over the back of the chair and used it to open the case. The file looked so harmless with its series of buff folders and packets of photographs, but it had the power to shatter most people’s sanity. He opened one folder and read the contents of a piece of A4 paper for what must have been the tenth time.

‘..... before his death, agent Richter found evidence that the group he calls “Das Geheimnis,” have been around for a very long time. The group have their own ancient books, charting their migration across Europe. If these books are to be believed, they originated as a separate species in the rift valley area of Africa. The remarkable thing about their history is that they had a working civilisation in central Africa a million years before homosapiens, our ancestors, walked the earth.’

Serge closed the folder and noticed his hands were shaking.

“A million years before we came down out of the fucking trees.” He muttered to himself.

The hooker rolled over and looked at him through droopy, half asleep eyes.

“What was that honey ?”

He put the folder back in the case and locked it.

“I was wondering if we could do all that again ?”

“You’ll need to pay for an extra hour.”

“Do a good job and I’ll pay for an extra two hours Natalie.”

“My name is Natalia.”

He stepped out of his boxer short and got back into the bed. She had a dark bush of pubic hair, which pleased him, it was a rare thing these days, a nice bush. He ran his fingers across her tummy and plunged them into that wonderful bush. Natalia giggled and pushed him over on his back. She smiled at him before sucking his dick, that too he liked. Serge forgot all about ancient histories and strange groups as Natalia did amazing things to his dick with her tongue.

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Spider didn't know where Andrei had intended them to spend the night. Ruby realised that Spider was still driving fast and it was long past nightfall.

"We need to stop Spider. Andrei will need his wound cleaning and the vehicles need running repairs." She said.

"I'd rather sleep in the car." Said Sarah.

Ruby ignored Sarah, Olga had told her at least twenty times that sleeping in the car was suicide in the freezing temperatures of the Carpathian winter.

"I think Andrei was going to stop at a quarry, but I've no idea where it is." Said Spider.

"The bandits might remember seeing the van there anyway," said Ruby, "just look for an empty house and we'll take our chances. It is only for one night."

Spider drove on and there seemed to be nothing either side of the road other than snow covered fields. Eventually there was the faint shape of a driveway leading off to their right and Spider slowed almost to a halt. He put on his indicator and opened the window to wave to Olga and point at the driveway.

"I think she's got the idea." He said.

The driveway dipped away from the road and turned a corner onto what looked like a well-kept driveway.

"This looks a nice place Ruby, that could be dangerous. No one cares about an old quarry, but someone will care about wherever this driveway leads to." Said Spider.

"We need somewhere and it's only for tonight. By tomorrow night we'll be over the border into Bulgaria."

"I never thought I'd be so pleased to hear anyone say that." Said Sarah.

The driveway turned a corner and in front of them was a large house. There were no lights on or any vehicles parked on the tarmac area in front of the house. As they pulled up the steady fall of snow increased and Ruby found the idea of taking shelter in the house was irresistible.

"This looks like the kind of place someone rich would live." Said Sarah.

"We could drive on, look for somewhere less....." Began Spider.

"Less comfortable, less likely to have food in the larder. We're staying here, I'm fed up with roughing it."

Ruby was out of the car and the wind seemed to chill her blood. She approached the door and on a sudden whim lifted the edge of a large flower pot next to the door. There was a key there and it fitted the door and they were inside. Sarah flicked a few light switches, but nothing happened.

"They probably have a generator somewhere," said Olga, "but we can spend a night here quite comfortably without electricity."

"I'll look for the generator once we've got Andrei out of the van." Said Spider.

Spider literally carried Andrei over his shoulder, easily carrying the large gun smuggler. Armed with flashlights from the van they found the kitchen at the rear of the house and Spider gently sat Andrei in a comfortable looking chair by the window.

"They have real food !" Said Ruby.

She'd already noticed the two fridge freezers had their doors left open and both were empty. Most likely they'd entered a summer home for a wealthy businessman from one of the main cities, they weren't that far from Bucharest. The pantry Ruby had looked in was full though. Tins, jars and packets of just about anything and everything that was good to eat. Most of the labels were in East European languages, but the pictures on the containers showed the promises of wonderful foods contained inside.

"Tinned peaches." Said Sarah.

She picked up the tin from the shelf in the pantry and bounced it in her hand as though she'd found the most precious treasure in the world. It had only been a couple of days, but Ruby too longed for a decent meal cooked in a proper kitchen.

"Try the cooker, it's probably attached to a gas bottle outside." Said Olga.

Sarah turned the dial up to full on one of the burners and pressed the ignition button. Instantly that corner of the kitchen was illuminated by a soft blue light.

"Looks like we're having a decent meal tonight." Said Ruby.

Olga found a large kettle and she'd just filled it and put it on the cooker when the fridge light came on and its motor sprang to life. Ruby pressed two switches by the door and the kitchen was brightly lit by three long fluorescent tubes on the ceiling.

"Looks like Spider found the generator." She said.

Now they had lighting, Olga examined Andrei's bullet wound and Sarah began to dig through the food in the pantry. Given her way they'd probably be eating tinned salmon and caviar, so Ruby put the can opener in her pocket.

"It was in the basement," Said Spider, "and there's a rack of weapons down there. I've no idea what the guy who owns this place does for a living, but he's definitely not a pacifist."

Spider washed his hands and looked around.

"What's for dinner?" He asked.

Ruby simply pointed at Sarah and her heap of favourite but impractical foods for any sensible evening meal. They fought and the language became fairly bad, but eventually the group sat down to a proper meal on proper plates. Three courses, including tinned mulligatawny soup to start and tinned peaches and condensed milk for dessert. The main course had been something Olga called goulash and it only needed one very large pan to cook it. Some very odd tinned ingredients had gone into the goulash, but everyone agreed that it was delicious. It was late when they sat drinking brandy and felt comfortable for the first time since leaving Budapest.

"I wonder how many bedrooms there are." Said Olga.

"Probably enough for two each." Said Andrei.

"I bet there aren't any sheets." Said Sarah.

There weren't, or pillows. They searched through cupboards and found a great many clean blankets, but no sheets. No one was complaining though, apart from Sarah. They made up enough beds for the night with their bedrolls from the van and a layer of extra blankets. Spider and Sarah claimed a bedroom quite a distance from everyone else, it had been a while since any of them had enjoyed any real privacy.

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Ruby had been having a dream about Carlos and in the dream he'd been tied to a bed and covered in whipped cream. She wasn't really sure if she'd woken up properly, everything in the bedroom seemed so indistinct and there wasn't a sound. She had to be somewhere and it was important. Her dirty clothes she'd taken off went back on again, including the blouse that was now stiff from the

congealed blood. Her jacket seemed to be hiding, but she found it had fallen off the chair and was up against the wall. Ruby checked herself over in the light of a flashlight and decided she was dressed well enough to go outside. Part of her still felt so sleepy.....

“Get yourself together girl. This is important.” She muttered to herself.

Downstairs and she noticed a pair of gloves on a wall unit by the door. Gloves, yes of course, she needed gloves it might easily be minus fifteen outside. The gloves were far too big for her, but she put them on and opened the front door, leaving the lock latched back.

“Which way ?”

The back of the van was unlocked and Ruby picked up the large rechargeable lamp. She swung its beam about and noticed a slight movement in the woods. An arm was beckoning her, or was she dreaming it ? No, there was the shape of a face and an arm beckoning. The wood looked so cold and the snow looked so deep.

“This is fucking important !” She shouted at herself.

Ruby entered the woods and spotted footprints leading her further away from the house. She followed the trail of scuffs and marks in the snow and every time she felt like giving up and returning to her nice warm bed, an arm would appear in the trees and beckon her on. She quickly lost track of time and distance, she might well have walked for miles.

“Over here Ruby.”

He was wearing jeans and a dark jacket and when he pulled back the hood she realised it was Kurt. For some reason she simply had to hug him for quite some time, while he hugged her back.

“Did you kill the bandit ? She asked.

“No, you did that.”

“I thought I might have.”

Ruby moved back a little and gave him a long look over. Kurt still looked the same as he that night, the night Lucy had died. He even had the same slight east European accent.

“Why me Kurt, why change me, curse me with this !?”

He had a flower in his hand, a poppy, but far brighter in colour than any poppy Ruby had seen before. He handed her the flower and it seemed to almost glow in the darkness.

“These grow on the shores of the Black Sea,” he said, “but not at this time of year.”

It all seemed surreal and Ruby tried closing her eyes and concentrating, hoping to wake up in her bed. But she opened them to find Kurt grinning at her and she was still in the freezing cold woods.

“I didn’t curse you Ruby, you always had the ability. I just woke you up.”

He hugged her and kissed her forehead.

“You won’t find anything but death in Varna, but your route will take you there. There will be a lot of death in Varna. Can you be strong Ruby ?

“I can be strong.”

“You’ll need to be ! Go to my villa on the coast, but I won’t be there. You’ll know why you’re there once you arrive. Can you be strong Ruby ?”

“I told you, I can be strong !”

“You’ll need to cross the Black Sea, how is your concern. I’ll tell you the place you need to reach and the best route. It’s the most dangerous region on Earth Ruby, can you be strong ?”

“Yes, yes, tell me where I’m going ?”

He told her and it wasn’t the cold that made her shiver. Could she be that strong, that tough ? She listened and remembered and then Kurt was hugging her again and disappearing into the woods.

Ruby was so cold and so tired and the snow looked so comfortable. She turned off the lamp, it was keeping her awake. Ruby sat against a tree and it was wonderful to let herself finally sleep.

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“Get up Ruby, Spider is cooking something he calls a fry up.”

Olga was gone, leaving her bedroom door open. It had all been a dream after all, though Ruby remembered everything he’d told her and where to go after crossing the Black Sea.

“Crossing the black sea ! Silly bitch, listen to yourself.” She muttered.

She sat on the edge of the bed and looked for her bag with the clean knickers in it. She saw her outdoor coat folded up on the chair and on it was a poppy, a bright red poppy. She was naked and it was cold, but Ruby walked over and picked up the brightest red poppy she’d ever seen.

“It’s real.”

The flower was fresh, it looked like it had been picked that morning. A poppy that only grew in the summer, yet she held it in her hand. Ruby cried, she now knew the rest was true and what awaited her and her friends in Varna and beyond.

“The most dangerous place on earth. Don’t worry Kurt, I can be strong.”

~ ~

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