

Abduction

It was nine days since the boy had been abducted. Negotiations had taken a bad turn and threats had been issued, reinforced by a package containing the boy's left ear and a thumb drive video showing the dreadful act.

Mina Sverdlovsk's ¹ mission was to track them but intervene only if the boy was judged to be in further immediate danger. The long game was to identify the sponsors, those who had set up this abduction and to deal with them in whatever way was deemed appropriate.

She was late to the party, making her task of catching them more difficult.

Mina had been airlifted by helicopter from the French Alps to the site of the burned-out shell of the abandoned Mercedes, believed to have been stolen in Vienna.

From there she had followed on her mountain bike, brought with her from Morzine.

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Born and raised in Sevastopol in the Crimean peninsula of southern Ukraine, at the age of twenty-two, Mina Sverdlovsk had been orphaned when her family had been wiped out by a Russian drone attack on their apartment block. When tragedy struck, she had been studying at the Taras Shevchenko University in Kyiv for a degree in medical imaging, building on her lifelong interest in photography. Eventually, after a period in Poland as a refugee, she came to the notice of GBG (Global Bio-Genetics) who had employed her as a contract agent, used initially as a courier smuggling thumb drives containing software codes to the Ukrainian military and then and later to insert agents to key locations or rescue individuals or small groups smuggling them to safety Poland or Slovakia.

Within a few months in this far-hand role she had been recognised as resourceful, clever and reliable. With support and training from GBG, she had been upgraded, making a new life under cover in the French Alps based at Morzine, working freelance as a black runs ski guide/mentor in winter, swapping to extreme rock climbing over the summer months and taking time off when required to undertake projects as directed by GBG, including the 'disappearances' of nasty individuals in Belarus, Ukraine and once, at a secret conference centre near Moscow, an ultra-secure establishment run jointly by the FSB (Federal Security Service - formerly the KGB) and the SVR (Foreign Intelligence Service - equivalent of the CIA).

As Mary Taylor, provided with a secure British Passport and others for Polish and Slovakian identities, Mina was able to move around eastern Europe with ease, often posing as a photo-journalist specialising in climate change issues.

Within GBG, her code name was *Lynx* - a solitary hunter that hunts mainly by stalking and ambush.

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Contact

Since setting out from the drop-off point, Mina had been moving flat out, guided by sporadic snippets beamed to her upgraded iPhone from satellite surveillance data gathered by GBG. The hostage group she was chasing had taken to hill paths, probably assuming they would be impossible to find. However, they were inexperienced and careless and Mina could easily spot the clues.

It was shortly after noon on day five of her pursuit.

On the previous evening, stitching together the information from GBG, it had seemed the hostage takers had been aiming for the sprawling Slovenian city of Nitra until they had abruptly veered to the north east. Then, only seventeen kilometres short of the Polish border, her quarry had changed direction again, heading south east into the Vihorlat Mountains.

On this new trajectory, they seemed to be aiming for the Ukrainian border around one hundred kilometres distant, as the crow flies. From this random behaviour it seemed to Mina that the hostage takers were being guided to the exchange point where the boy would be handed over to the sponsors.

Tracking across the high undulating plateau of the Vihorlat Mountains had become more of a challenge as the surroundings offered little cover except the scattering of giant rocks which stood like sentinels. When these pinnacle-shaped rocks had first appeared, she had taken them for people watching for her.

Picking her way through the boulders on the track, rock-hopping when required, her thighs and arms ached. In the thickening cloud, the light was fading into an early darkness. She must find a lay-up point soon. Travelling on the bike during night hours was too risky (she might stumble onto them); and too dangerous (she might fall and break bones, wreck her bike).

Spotting them ahead, she dropped to the ground, rolled sideways and lay in the scrub, relying on the camouflage provided by her elasticated onesie coverall.

When the last of the four was out of sight, she shouldered her mountain bike to about fifty metres away from the rough track, stowed it in a shallow depression then recorded its GPS coordinates with her iPhone. Before hiding the bike under a lightweight waterproof camouflage cover taken from a pannier, she removed the two high capacity power banks from the bracket where she had been topping up from a dynamo on the bike rear wheel, stowing them in her large rucksack. These power sources would give her a further five to six days of normal iPhone usage and could be used to quick-charge her micro-drone batteries.

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According to her position on the satellite version of Google Maps, she was less than sixty kilometres from the Ukrainian border as the crow flies.

Her first challenge was to get ahead of them, knowing from her training that those fearing pursuit generally looked behind, seldom checking ahead. At a crouch, following on foot, using her infrared visor to combat the gloom, she travelled in a wide looping arc.

'Wading' through the thick, waist-high tangled scrub had been gruelling, much tougher than riding her bike.

At each sighting-point, she had watched as the three men and the boy stumbled along a rubble path hemmed in on both sides by thick scrub, a landscape riven with deep gorges filled with rushing water from ongoing Spring snowmelt in full flood.

As the last dregs of the day passed, full darkness raced towards her from the east and black clouds released their rain burden in short sharp showers, whipped at her by a rising wind.

Moving as quickly as she dared, she set off, aiming to get clear of them again and set up her nighttime bivouac. In the last of the fading gloom, she crawled towards her chosen sentinel rock and lay behind it, preparing herself for a sneak peek.

As she eased her head to the side to check on her quarry, the tallest man was standing with binoculars raised and seemed to be looking directly at her.

She ducked down and lay still and played possum while counting elephants, expecting to hear the sputt of bullets nearby or their whine passing overhead. At one hundred elephants, she looped the weapons' pouch strap over her neck and shoulders, clipping it to her back surface of her rucksack to hold it firmly in place.

'Surfing' through the springy undergrowth on her gloved hands, reinforced elbows and thick kneepads, Mina moved slowly to maximise the camouflage of her onesie and rucksack as she retreated from her first way-point before moving in a wide loop to her next chosen lay-up point behind an even larger boulder than before.

Her three-mode weapon set was unusual. Fabricated from a polymer developed by NASA, it could be reconfigured to sniper, machine pistol and handgun modes. The set was bespoke, ergonomically perfect, crafted in a specialist hi-tech facility in Zug, Switzerland. For sniping, high pressure polymetric nitrogen gas propels a hypodermic syringe dart in virtual silence at just below Mach speed, ensuring the tiny spinning missile is delivered with exceptional accuracy.

The sniper targeting system was automated, enabled to recognise the three hostage takers and the boy Ahmed from images taken either with her special ops binoculars which

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incorporated a high definition digital camera or by her bespoke surveillance lens or by her near silent micro-drone, a device reserved mainly for nighttime monitoring.

In sniper mode, for security, stability and accuracy, the firing mechanism was voice activated, calibrated to her voice alone. When its target sighting had been acquired and verified by Mina, a whispered "yes" was used to fire the dart. In a recent refresher training session, she had taken out the five widely spaced test targets in just under 23 seconds, outshining her ex-SAS mentor.

Twenty slow minutes later Mina Sverdlorsk finally reached the chosen sentinel boulder on the low ridge. Angling herself onto her side, she fixed the miniaturised custom-made targeting lens onto what looked like a selfie-stick with tripod legs. When the legs were firmly stable, she inched the credit card sized lens out from behind the boulder just above the level of the surrounding vegetation to enable a wide angle view.

The infrared video image from the lens displayed on her iPhone showed the four targets as tiny red blotches widely spaced along the track. Thankfully they were stationary. It seemed they also had learned that to keep moving on the rubble path during dark hours was too risky.

From the touchpad at the base of the selfie-handle, she moved the focus, studying each target in turn, enhancing resolution to create ultra-high definition 3-D images of each member of the group to upload later as further proof she was now in contact with her quarry.

During this short period, none of the group had moved. It appeared they were already asleep.

Sending up her monitoring drone ² she parked it to hover at around fifty metres above them.

Operating in infra-red mode, the drone recorded the precise GPS locations of each of her targets, transmitting the data directly to the monitoring app on her iPhone. She set the drone to surveillance mode. If any of her targets moved outside a two metre circle from their current location, her iPhone would alert her by vibrating vigorously.

In light winds this drone had an endurance of around three hours but could be quickly recalled and a new battery pack fitted so that within minutes it would be back on station, reacquiring the targets. She had six of these replacement batteries which could also be re-charged from her iPhone power banks. In high winds or heavy rain the tiny drone was more or less useless and her default option became her special ops binoculars.

² With eight 125 mm diameter rotors this drone looked more like a toy than the high tech device it was in reality. It too had been made to order in the same Swiss laboratory which had made her dart gun.

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With the drone operating satisfactorily, she moved away to relieve herself, sanitised her hands, snacked slowly on two hundred grammes of apricots and fifty grammes of mixed nuts while sipping three hundred millilitres of concentrated mixed fruit juice, following a routine she repeated every three hours.

After a final check on her targets, she settled snugly inside her four seasons sleeping bag, composed her daily update report and sent it to GBG using her iPhone in satellite mode. Setting her iPhone timer at one hundred and twenty minutes, Mina ducked her head inside, zipped up and closed her eyes, hoping to catnap.

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On the following morning, the group of four moved into the start of another dull day, a helpful breeze blowing light rain into their faces keeping their heads down.

Earlier, as they were breaking camp, Mina had set off again, keeping ahead of them, moving quickly to re-establish another lay-up point at about fifteen hundred metres east and around a hundred metres south of the line of the track.

Established behind her targeted sentinel rock near the edge of the deep gorge, she studied them using her sighting lens in light gathering mode.

It was clear the hostage group had set off on their long trek unprepared for the rubble path they were following. From their stumbling progress Mina judged these people were townies, most probably apprehensive of the spectacular wild environment they were passing through.

As the day progressed, from each lay-up point, Mina studied their leader in particular, the man she had designated as 'Alfa' in her updates to GBG. Alfa was a head taller than his two comrades with a full dark beard and a short ponytail, Bravo had dark stubble growth while Charlie had a light blonde fuzz. The boy Ahmed was small and painfully thin with straggling light brown hair.

Throughout the day, Alfa was prone to shouting and gesticulating, driving them on, she thought. Mina wondered if he was taking drugs to boost his confidence and energy levels. Or perhaps he was just naturally a bully.

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The group of four had settled for the night, straddled apart, each in their own spot taking shelter beside a sentinel with the boy nearest to her, Alfa at the rear, where he could easily monitor them. He does not trust them, she thought.

The boy, already in his sleeping bag, was soon asleep.

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Studying the faces of the hostage takers she saw they were dog tired, yawning and stifling groans, determined not to be the first to admit defeat. Over the course of the day they had been stopping to rest more frequently. Once again they were eating junk food, mainly chocolate bars, high in sugar and low in nutrition. Earlier, Alfa had scolded them, reminding them to hide their discarded wrappers and empty bottles.

It appeared they were running out of water but wisely they had not taken the easy option of drinking from the boggy pools near the track which would almost certainly be contaminated by the wild goats which appeared from time to time on the horizon, staring at them before disappearing back into the mist like wraiths.

Even mild dehydration could induce fatigue.

Mina knew from the GPS data on her iPhone she was at an altitude of around nine hundred metres, the height she was acclimatised to living in Morzine where the oxygen deficit was around four percent.

Perhaps this small difference was another factor slowing their progress.

Using her special ops binoculars, switching between light gathering and infrared modes, Mina scrutinised Alfa as he peered at a handheld device. From its appearance and distinctive colours, it was probably an older model Garmin, inferior to the top of the range version she had left in Morzine, knowing the GPS data provided by GBG to her iPhone would give her centimetre accuracy, military precision.

There had been no sign of Alfa engaging in dialogue or tapping messages into this device. Mina surmised it was likely that Alfa was following a predetermined route with a known destination although this notion clashed with the highly changeable route they had followed to arrive at their present position.

It seemed that somehow he was being guided by others.

After mulling this over, Mina concluded if Alfa had a sat-phone, he probably used it only during the hours of darkness while buried inside his sleeping bag, keeping its presence secret from Bravo and Charlie. This might be another reason why he kept them strung out ahead of him.

Now, at around twenty kilometres away, the proximity of the Ukrainian border gave rise to concern.

Would the handover be in Ukraine or sooner?

Depending on how many others might be there, Mina feared she might not be able to rescue the boy safely. She was confident she could deal with the three hostage takers but with other is in the mix it could prove tricky.

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Although there was still about an hour left of daylight, the clouds were rolling towards them from the Ukraine and the first spots of heavy rain began to spit on a rising breeze signalling the prospect of another wet night ahead. If the rain turned to a deluge, she would not be able to use her drone to monitor them which would mean manual surveillance and little sleep.

Mina turned her attention to Ahmed. The boy was curled into a ball, inside his sleeping bag, his hands clutching his rucksack with only his head protruding. He was ahead of Charlie by about a hundred metres and Bravo was a further eighty metres away with a further hundred metres to Alfa, more or less the extended formation she had observed since she first caught up with them with Alfa in a sheep dog position where he could easily monitor their behaviour.

Another thought occurred - perhaps Alfa had recruited Bravo and Charlie without really knowing them well. She shrugged her shoulders and grimaced. From a child, Mina Sverdlovsk had shunned teams, preferring to operate alone, hence her code name.

Mina zoomed in to check out Ahmed more closely, looking for signs of swelling around the base of his damaged ear and the surrounding neck area which might indicate infection, relieved to see the ear seemed to be healing.

At an earlier stop Mina had studied the boy in greater detail.

Fixed to his right ankle was a heavy locator tag with a lighter, slimmer version on his left wrist. Both tags were a bright fluorescent yellow. She had been shown videos of similar explosive bracelets used by the USA at Guantanamo bay and elsewhere during the war on terror years. In these videos, the bracelets had been detonated on manikins to devastating effect.

Mina reckoned the boy had been warned if he tried to escape, they would blow him apart, starting with his wrist ³, his 'dirty hand'.

From a synoptic report sent from GBG, Mina knew the abductors had demanded a mixture of uncut diamonds to the value of two million USD, 50 grammes of enriched Uranium and, crucially, that the Turkish Government must revoke a longstanding arrangement and veto US/Nato flights from bases in Turkey in support of the Ukrainian military.

There was also the unrealistic caveat that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan must broadcast a demand on national television demanding that President Trump should publicly condemn the Israeli President Benjamin Netanyahu as a genocidal psychopath and

³ As a Muslim, his left hand was designated his 'dirty hand' used to wipe himself after defecating - losing it would make him a pariah.

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call on the Israeli Government to replace him. In return, and only when all of these conditions had been fulfilled, the hostage takers had promised the boy would be returned in good health.

From GBG, Mina knew the Turkish response had been to ask for time to make the necessary arrangements while stringing the perpetrators along with an offer of an increase in uncut diamonds as the Uranium was proving difficult to source. It was at this point help from GBG had been sought although they had been aware of the situation by monitoring comms traffic at GCHQ through a backdoor portal established years earlier

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Frustratingly, despite the powerful resources at their disposal, GBG had so far been unable to identify Alfa, Bravo and Charlie.

The view at GBG was the boy's abduction was almost certainly another black ops initiative set in motion by Vladimir Putin to try to disrupt the ongoing strategically important political/military pact between the US and NATO allies, a lucrative financial gravy train which fed millions of USD into the Turkish economy.

Over the decades since Putin rose to power, large amounts of this grey money had been syphoned off into the coffers of Erdogan and his cronies who benefited massively from the various contracts linked to these air bases and other more secret assets which posed a continuing threat to Russia, thwarting Putin's dream of rebuilding the Russian Empire and reestablishing the former USSR.

Current GBG thinking was that the hostage takers were probably Belarusian mercenaries being used by the Russians to get the boy to a safe place in Belarus or Ukraine after which these hirelings would be eliminated as inconvenient.

Mina's mission was to track the hostage group hoping, if possible, to capture on video those who had sponsored the kidnap, information which could be used against Putin.

However, at all times, her first priority must be to protect Ahmed and facilitate his removal to a safe place. If necessary, on her own authority, she must eliminate or disable Alfa and his colleagues to protect the boy.

Mina leaned back behind her current sentinel and drafted an update report on her iPhone which she uploaded via satellite to GBG in Glasgow, attaching a selection from her recent photoshoots.

Mina's personal view, not shared with GBG, was that the hostage takers were part of Vladimir Putin's black ops squad based in Belarus, acting directly on his personal authority.

⁴ For information about GBG and GCHQ, read 'Twingling' at www.thebuzzinbee.co.uk.

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Eventually, all four settled for the night and the vibrations sent from her micro-drone to her iPhone stopped.

After a final check, it seemed they had all chosen places to sleep after which Mina went through her own nightly routine before snuggling down into her sleeping bag to try to catnap.

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Update

Twenty-four hours later the hostage group were again settling for the night, straggled out along the rubble track as before, now around eighteen kilometres from the Ukrainian border, a distance perhaps reachable during the following day.

Only Alfa was awake, not yet in his sleeping bag, pacing backwards and forwards, waving his left hand in the air, agitated, stumbling, cursing.

He stood still, stared at what might be a mobile phone in his huge hand, definitely not the Garmin Mina had seen previously. A thin cable connected to a looped earbud.

She zoomed in to study Alfa's face, eavesdropping with a pencil-like directional microphone clipped to the side of the sighting lens.

Alfa spoke in what might be a peasant Russian dialect but with a peculiar slur.

Mina could not decipher what he had said, filling her with dread. Perhaps his sponsors or colleagues were nearby, making the boy's rescue more problematic.

Using the matrix of infrared sensors supported by a tiny ultra-fast circuit board incorporated into the sighting mechanism, her dart rifle operated equally effectively both in full darkness or in half-light. A bonus of night strikes on multiple targets is that first hits often passed undetected, even when they were part of a tighter group.

Now would be a good time to deal with Alfa and his two colleagues and get the boy to safety before others arrived. However, Ahmed seemed to be in no immediate danger.

She would ask for input from GBG before taking action.

Resting her back against her sentinel, her knees steadying her hands and her thumbs flying at the keys, Mina prepared her update report attaching the voice file and video clip of Alfa's side of the conversation, adding her own commentary, suggesting now was the time to intervene. Before sending, she paused, reviewed what she had written, adjusted it then pressed the speed dial dual-key combination on her iPhone, uploading her latest package to GBG in Glasgow via her satellite link.

Past experience suggested they would hold a mission conference allowing the support team in Lab 5 to read her information and make their contributions. It might take a while.

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She assembled her weapon in sniper rifle mode. Checking the western horizon she saw daylight was rapidly fading. This suited her. Provided the targets remained settled for the night, she already had their locations pre-programmed into her sighting database.

In her earbud, much sooner than expected, the robotic voice from the GBG login system said:

Code in

From memory Mina tapped in her familiar 32 digit mix of alphanumerics and symbols well within the six seconds permitted.

The voice said:

Verify

On a whim, Mina said:

'Mina had a little lamb, its fleece was . . .'

The robotic voice interrupted:

Wait

After a series of clicks and buzzes setting up the encryption parameters, the familiar voice of Ms Celeste Hopkins from Lab 5 in the GBG building at the West of Scotland Science Park said:

Mary, thank you for your revised sit-rep report and video compilation.

From your closeups, the hostage looks as if he is in reasonable health although he is clearly tired, exhausted. Do you agree?

'Yes, Ahmed is holding up well although he must be in constant terror. I guess this experience might affect him for life. Please, do you agree with my view his locator tags are fakes?'

Yes, Mary, we agree they are fakes. We have enhanced the images you sent and agree these are not authentic versions the US used at Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere during their war on terror. Our assessment is they are very good copies, probably supplied by the Russians. In our view they are unarmed, designed to frighten the boy Ahmed.

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Like you, we believe Alfa thinks they are real, hence the reason for keeping the boy at arm's length. Yes, whatever they might have told Alfa, we agree it makes no sense to even risk destroying their key asset.

'Good, I hope we are right. I've seen videos of what these bracelets can do. Despicable. My first action will be to remove them.'

Mary, our satellite sweep of your wider area shows a container-like igloo structure estimated to be around ten metres in diameter. It is located about thirty-two kilometres ahead of you, just over the Ukrainian border. It looks very like a survival pod as used in the Antarctic, modified, re-purposed. It has been re-painted, and is well-camouflaged, hidden in a deep gully, very difficult to spot. We assume it was placed there by helicopter. About fifteen minutes ago it sent up a drone which transmitted and received encrypted messages to a Russian satellite. We are working on our copies of these exchanges hoping to decipher their content. No firm progress so far. These decrypts can take days.

The pod also has a retractable whip aerial which has been in contact with a terrestrial device, probably Alfa. These signals are also encrypted. It is low-powered and we only have fragments of them. Our view is that these signals are being used to guide Alfas' group. On their present trajectory, this pod is where Alfa is taking the hostage.

We agree with your assessment that Alfa and his two comrades are not trained soldiers, almost certainly low level mercenaries. As you know, they are not on any of our databases.

When they reach the pod, we think the mercenaries will be eliminated immediately, disposable because they know too much.

With Ahmed in their possession, the real thugs have two main options.

The most likely is they sit tight in the pod until the negotiations run their course.

This might well include torture. In the end, they will probably dispose of the boy and make their escape.

Alternatively, when they have Ahmed aboard they dial up a heavy lift helicopter and remove the pod with them inside, probably to Belarus or a Russian stronghold in the north-eastern sector of Ukraine. Belarus is our bet.

This second option would expose Ahmed to a risk of physical torture by so called 'experts' possibly ex-KGB. This could mean finger and toe amputations. Or they might use psychological pressure, such as threatening to broadcast nude photos

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of him on Facebook or Tik-Tok, destroying his personal life and embarrassing his family.

Another horrible possibility would be to inject Ahmed to make him reveal whatever secrets and dirt he may have on President Erdogan and his cohorts. The FSB have a range of vile torture drugs they use for this purpose.

Whichever approach the hostage takers adopt, we judge Erdogan will tough it out and in the end the boy will almost certainly be executed and images of his mutilated body broadcast on social media to punish the Turkish Government and disgrace Erdogan.

*So, yes, Mary, you must intervene **now**, please. If they get the boy inside that pod, it would be very difficult to get him back to safety.*

We have a small helicopter on standby which we have located around ten kilometres from you. When you have completed your strike, we will send it to lift the boy to safety.

It is also highly desirable that Alfa is taken alive. We also want their weapons and equipment to help us gain information to trace their roots and to use against those who hired them.

At the helicopter base camp, I have GBG assets recently arrived from Scotland who will take responsibility for Ahmed and arrange for his safe return to his family. We would like to take Alfa into custody too, if that proves possible.

When we have Ahmed and hopefully Alfa and his equipment, your part in the mission will be over and you should head back to Bratislava and return to Morzine for an online debrief with our GBG mission support team.

Mary, I repeat, I am tasking you to recover the boy at the earliest opportunity.

Do you have any questions?

'No Ms Hopkins, no questions. Mission accepted. Out.'

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First Strike

Mina Sverdlovsk checked from the edge of her chosen boulder, pleased that all four targets had finally settled. It was almost fully dark, another moonless night with heavy cloud cover, threatening more rain.

She initiated her Apple Watch timer, a technique learned in training which she found helpful, keeping her focussed, driven, countering her innate tendency to over-analyse every situation.

Elapsed time: 00 minutes.

She then ran through her mental checklist, setting up the sighting system from the app on her iPhone.

Her rifle had not been fired recently. Scanning eastwards in infrared mode, she found a goat perched on a huge boulder about fifty metres from the boy. When its head came into focus, it was staring directly at her, unblinking, as if trying to mesmerise her. Perhaps it is, she thought.

Loading a sleep dart, she aimed at its neck below its right ear. With her test 'target acquired' flashing green, she whispered 'yes'.

The goat's knees crumpled and it keeled over, out of sight.

Easing herself into a comfortable position she selected a further sleep dart, its dose chosen to match her estimate of the boy's weight, repeated the sighting process and watched as he too slouched into a drugged sleep, removing him temporarily from her equation for around eight hours.

Loading two kill darts into a fresh cassette, she repeated the sighting process for Bravo then Charlie, providing them with sudden but peaceful exits, bringing forward their inevitable demise. Had they reached the igloo pod they might have suffered horribly.

Loading a further sleep dart chosen to match Alfa's weight estimate, she took extra care, aiming at the nape of his neck, below his right ear, just clear of his heavy beard.

The brute seemed to be asleep.

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The 'acquired target' sighting system flashed green but unexpectedly Alfa leaned forward onto his knees and shouted to his colleagues in his odd slur.

Rising to his feet when he got no reply, he shouted to Ahmed before reaching into the breast pocket of his parka, pulling out his communicator device.

Was it a mobile phone or a two-way radio?

He stepped out of his sleeping bag, crouched on his knees, peering and stabbing viciously at the device.

The sighting system reacquired the chosen spot below his right ear and the confirmation light flashed green.

Mina whispered 'yes'.

Alfa pitched forward and fell badly. Mina checked him over carefully with her night-sight binoculars. His face was badly damaged, blood oozing from a broken nose, his mouth wide open.

Had he alerted the occupants of the igloo pod or perhaps others already waiting at the border?

How long would they take to arrive?

How many extra opponents might she have to deal with to get the boy to safety?

Elapsed time: 32 minutes.

With practiced ease she quickly reconfigured the weapon into a machine pistol and loaded a larger but lower powered cassette with sixteen sleep darts. In this mode, the weapon was used for reaction shooting, as she had rehearsed on moving targets for many, many hours in training.

With the weapon in its protective pouch, she slung it around her shoulder and fixed it in place by a near silent hook and loop fastener attached to her large equipment rucksack.

Kneeling, with her iPhone in daylight mode, she checked that the area around her shooting layup point was clear and clean. Using her gloved hands, she brushed the earth and rubble to remove the imprints of her feet and body.

Standing in the vegetation which reached up to her thighs, she surveyed the impending descent into the gorge which separated her from Ahmed and Alfa.

Elapsed time: 39 minutes.

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Wearing her sturdy light-gathering goggles, she moved at a low crouch through the thick interweave of scrub, working her way along the rim parallel to the westerly flow of the river far below, heading for a point roughly opposite Ahmed.

Fully upright behind a sentinel, she flexed her aching muscles, yawning deliberately to relieve tension.

Using feel and her iPhone torch in low power daylight mode, she checked that her equipment and clothing were in good order.

To counter a dip in energy level, she slowly chewed a high-calory nut and banana based energy bar, washing down each mouthful with sips of concentrated Ribena juice from a small flask.

When the blood sugar boost surged, she stepped forward to begin her steep descent into the cacophony rising from the rushing water far below, testing each foot and handhold carefully, aware the slightest slip, trip or stumble might easily end in death or serious injury.

She was also fighting tension arising from the urgent nagging concern that there was a far more dangerous challenge still to come.

As she neared the bottom of the chasm, the noise was deafening, the air filled with icy cold droplets forming a thin wispy fog.

Mina had known from the outset she must make a leap, take a calculated risk.

Elapsed time: 68 minutes.

Using her iPhone torch at full spotlight brightness, she checked the options on the opposite bank looking for suitable landing spots below her then checking the options upwards to reach Ahmed and Alfa.

Mina made her decision - choosing a narrow ledge with a thick bushy tree above it, the landing place with the best upward route. Using her iPhone with its flash set to full power, she took a detailed series of spotlight images to help remind her of the waypoints to be reached on her upward climb to the twisting track above where the hostage group awaited.

Pulled downwards by gravity as she flew across the void, it would be a nine metre leap across a horizontal gap of five metres, a stiff challenge. It was doable, she decided. This was the spot she had been looking for. The secret was to trust yourself and to grab the vegetation and hold hard to prevent being bounced back into the abyss while scrabbling

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to gain a toehold, regain stability and prepare for the strenuous challenge of the steep climb to follow.

Elapsed time: 77 minutes.

Mina chuckled softly - this was like an extreme version of parkour⁵ part of her GBG sponsored training with the UK SAS - but without soft landing safety mats.

Mina delved into her rucksack, put on a lightweight climbing crash helmet and safety goggles, changed to her heavy-duty rip resistant gloves, placed her climbing gloves in a side pocket of her onesie suit for later then repacked her rucksack, stowing all loose items including her machine pistol. She stowed her iPhone in its protected pouch pocket under the left arm of her onesie suit, shrugged into her thirty kilo rucksack and tightened its straps, realigning the internal air padding ribs to ensure her burden was snugged tightly but flexibly against her back, making it part of herself.

Bending her knees fully, she launched herself spreadeagled towards her chosen aiming point. The bushy tree absorbed much of the impact as her feet slithered down the sheer face onto the narrow ledge. Partially winded, she held on tightly while her adrenaline level subsided, wiggling her toes forwards until both toecaps were pushing hard against the vertical part of the ledge.

Holding the trunk of the small tree firmly with her right hand, she eased herself sideways to the cleft she had spotted, eased her left hand inside and twisted it, anchoring herself. Working with a stable three-point-contact to the cliff face, she fished out her climbing gloves and performed the familiar juggling act required to change from one set of gloves to the other.

At last she was ready to climb. With each move she tested and re-tested each hand and toehold before hauling herself upwards to repeat the process, conscious of her painfully slow progress but suppressing the desire to move faster - "better slow than sorry", the mantra she taught her rock climbing students.

Spurred on by renewed surges of adrenaline as each waypoint was achieved, she kept moving steadily. At the upper reaches of her climb, the scrub was thicker but taller and less deeply rooted. Sensing the slope becoming less steep, she spotted the dim outline

5

Parkour is a physical discipline akin to free-flow gymnastics which involves moving through an environment by running, jumping, climbing, and vaulting over obstacles to get from one point to another in the most efficient way possible. It is a non-competitive art form which focuses on functional strength, balance, and spatial awareness while also cultivating mental resilience, confidence, and self-discipline. Practitioners, known as traceurs, use their bodies to overcome physical and mental challenges, with its roots traced back to France in the 1980s, influenced by military obstacle training courses.

Lynx

of the odd triangular sentinel she had spotted from the far side of the gulley, planned as her final lay-up point for the traverse.

Scrabbling forwards on her hands and knees, she sat with her back against the boulder, taking deep breaths while reviewing her next actions.

The first large drops of rain began to fall. Unlike earlier storms, she welcomed this one. It would make drone and satellite surveillance more difficult if not impossible. On the downside, she reckoned the GBG rescue helicopter might not be able to fly until the storm abated.

Elapsed time: 103 minutes.

At a point closer to the boulder track, she kneeled in the dense vegetation, ready to duck if she spotted movement.

Facing eastwards, scanning slowly with her directional microphone, she listened through her Apple EarPods for sounds of movement from the direction of the igloo pod, trying to block out the low rumble of water rushing about fifty metres below her to her right. The wind was picking up again, affecting the microphone, making it difficult to hear clearly.

Frustrated, she change tack, cupped her ears and focussed intensely.

After a long five minutes, she concluded she was alone but still felt exposed. Perhaps a group from the igloo pod was already here, waiting for her to show herself. She considered checking with GBG in Glasgow to ask if they had spotted any activity at the pod but decided they would have told her if this was the case.

Easing onto her knees, she removed her rucksack and retrieved her hybrid machine pistol from its carry pouch. Draping it over her neck on its elasticated lanyard she centred it, testing for ease of access to the grip handle and trigger, then pressed the weapon onto the hook and loop pad on her chest, holding it in an 'at the ready' position while freeing up both hands.

The worry that enemy reinforcements were nearby persisted. As a precaution, she re-inserted her Apple EarBuds, checking they were linked to her throat mic both connected by Bluetooth to the iPhone under her left armpit. In this mode she would be able to speed dial GBG Control to ask for advice and backup, if required, although she was not hopeful they would reach her quickly enough.

Before heading eastwards to deal with Ahmed and Alfa, she changed to her visor, activating its infrared sensors then, pulled on her climbing crash helmet and tightened its strap. The helmet was almost an afterthought, using it mainly as protection from the heavy, driving rain coming from behind her, from the Ukrainian border.

Lynx

Elapsed time: 118 minutes.

Scrabbling, using her hands to save herself with each trip or slip, moving as fast as conditions allowed, she followed the twisting and undulating rock strewn path to Ahmed, the nearest of the four. The path comprised of large rounded boulder and loose scree was brutal, exhausting.

She stopped for a breather. Lifting her head, shimmering out of the downpour on the screen inside her visor, Mina saw the infrared outline of the hunched boy in his sleeping bag.

Elapsed time: 129 minutes.

Creeping on her hands and knees, she approached warily. With her head hovering close to his face, she could feel his soft but steady breathing on her cheek.

Removing and stowing her heavy duty gauntlets, she replaced them with sterile off-white latex gloves from her rucksack.

Squeezing hard, she tugged and twisted his undamaged ear.

There was no reaction.

Opening each eyelid in turn, shining her spotlight beam.

His irises remained dilated under the effect of the sleep dart serum.

This sixteen year-old who had been pushed to his limits under constant duress and threat of extermination, remained deeply asleep under the influence of the drug.

She found the spent dart and placed it in a small Ziplock bag coded Ahmed, part of her GBG protocol. The 'kill' and 'sleep' drugs were specially formulated and manufactured by GBG ⁶. In due course, she would be expected to return all darts fired during her mission to prevent the possibility of cloning by others.

Her next task was to remove the security bracelets from Ahmed's ankle and wrist, a procedure which she had been planning from the minute she first spotted them.

From her rucksack she extracted a slim package containing a self-erecting tent. Holding its grab handle above her head she kneeled beside the boy then pulled hard on the tag to fire its compressed air capsule. Inside a minute the tent had inflated to become a 1.5 metre dome surrounding Mina and the boy. It's built-in tungsten push stakes were

⁶

Read "Twingling" at www.thebuzzinbee.co.uk.

Lynx

unsuitable for the hard ground. Improvising, she anchored it by placing a ring of fist-sized stones on its perimeter internal skirt.

She now had a refuge in which to work, a camouflaged and waterproof bubble workspace of the kind used by bomb disposal teams and battlefield medics.

From her training, she knew there was a possibility these bracelets might contain a phial of cyanide gas, a cheap and deadly protection against unauthorised intrusion.

For her protection, Mina put on fresh latex gloves, this time in a textured black material designed to react by turning yellow if exposed to cyanide or a range of other equally deadly gases.

With a tiny head torch fixed to her helmet by a clip-on adjustable bracket, she began the slow business of inspecting the wrist bracelet, taking multiple images with her iPhone which compiled them into a fully detailed 3-D video showing every scuff and scratch, images transmitted to the screen inside her visor.

As expected, there was no obvious entry port. This was normal: these explosive devices contained no serviceable parts and the manufacturers delivered them 'ready-for-use' by a remote detonation signal or the remote initiation of an adjustable countdown timer.

From her rucksack she removed a fabric roll of mini tools, items similar to instruments used for micro-surgery. She reset her visor lens and its internal display to operate in digital microscopic mode, it focussing controlled by a simulated thumbwheel and touchpad displayed on the screen of her iPhone, a powerful combination providing live video feed capable of revealing the tiniest of junctions invisible to the naked eye. In the past, this lens and visor configuration with the roll of mini-tools had been used to defeat even the most sophisticated mechanical and electronic locks.

Using a tiny drill bit, she selected a hopeful indentation, a microscopic imperfection on the lower surface of the bracelet. With the bit whining at 5,000 rpm, just millimetres from the surface of the bracelet, she paused. Although no longer religious since losing her family, Mina closed her eyes briefly and asked Saint Olga of Kyiv to protect and guide her. Lowering the bit gently against the surface, allowing its diamond tipped cutting edges to do their work without pressing with excessive force until the resistance reduced. Reducing the speed, she eased the bit from the hole, listening for a tell-tale hiss of escaping gas.

No sound.

Her gloves remained black.

Over the next five minutes or so she continued, forming a ring of tiny holes around the lower perimeter of the ankle bracelet before changing to a miniature rotating file-saw

Lynx

to join the holes, finally easing the bottom section away from the main body still clamped to the boy's left wrist.

Illuminating the internal cavity of the device with her iPhone torch, she attached an thin, flexible wide-angled inspection probe to its socket in the side of the visor then inserted the probe into the crowded innards of the bracelet.

Her heart thudded like a hammer on an anvil when she saw a package of explosive charge held in place by a strong spring clamp. Mercifully, the detonation wires from a red control box had been disconnected, each end sealed with a blob of melted green plastic insulating material. Her guess had been correct. Closing her eyes, she counted elephants while her adrenaline dissipated and her blood pressure returned to normal.

Continuing her detailed forensic inspection in a more confident mood, she took a further series of digital images sent by Bluetooth from the probe to her iPhone which it rendered into a 3-D video model of the internal layout of the bracelet, relayed automatically to her visor. Using the surface of her iPhone screen, she rotated the image, checking for signs of a hidden booby trap.

To be certain, she repeated her check in ultra-slow mode then made her decision.

Inserting a small prise bar, she released the clamp spring releasing the explosive charge which slid gently into her gloved hand - thankfully still black.

Studying the charge, she removed her visor and sniffed its surface, sensing a faint trace of ammonia as used in certain less common plastic explosives, the type which might become unstable if exposed to high humidity⁷.

She took a series of images of the charge before sealing it inside a Ziplock bubble wrap bag.

With her visor back in place, she continued to work with her tools to release the internal locking mechanism and remove the bracelet from the boy's wrist.

Elapsed time: 152 minutes.

Gaining in confidence, she repeated the process on the larger, heavier leg bracelet.

Elapsed time: 169 minutes.

⁷

Plastic or gel explosives based on hygroscopic oxidizers such as ammonium nitrate, or containing high proportions of PETN (pentaerythritol tetranitrate) which, without good encapsulation, are the those where prolonged exposure to humid atmospheres can become unstable.

Laying out the ankle components beside those for the wrist bracelet, she made a close inspection video to attach to her report to GBG, adding commentary as she did so.

Mina remained very wary of these items and, as she had always intended, carefully placed each item of the dismantled bracelets inside a larger, reinforced Ziplock biodegradable bag⁸ which she eased outside to free up space inside the tent.

She checked Ahmed was still under sedation then eased him out of his sodden sleeping bag and into an RTP⁹, cradling his head inside its protective wrap-around cushion before zipping and sealing it, making it air and water tight.

Drying and packing the deflated dome tent, she returned it to her rucksack.

She dragged the boy gently into the deep scrub about five metres. Stowing his rucksack beside him, she recorded GPS coordinates. Back at the track, using her visor in infrared mode, she scanned his hiding place, pleased she was unable to see him.

Mina whispered to herself "snug as a bug in a rug", a phrase she had learned during a six-month residency at Lab 5 five years earlier.

Shrugging into her rucksack, she picked up the disposal bag containing the disassembled parts of both bracelets, picking her way carefully across the track and on through the deep undergrowth to the edge of the cliff where she hefted them out into the abyss to disappear into the rushing torrent below.

Back on the rocky track, she knelt beside Ahmed's sleeping location and checked that the spot was clean and clear, her iPhone torch on low-power daylight mode.

Standing fully upright with her back against Ahmed's sentinel, looking eastwards in the direction of the Ukrainian border with her ears cupped and her eyes closed, she listened intently for several minutes, hearing nothing except the surging whine of the wind and the rain hissing on the thick foliage which edged the track on both sides. She realised she was offering herself as a target albeit one difficult to hit in the downpour.

⁸

This bag had been previously used to carry her used food pouches, wrappers, juice cartons and the like, ensuring she left no litter trail during her mission.

⁹ Rescue Transfer Pod (RTP), an improved version of the field recovery carry holdall developed originally by the British SAS and made of rip-proof water-proof nylon with self-inflating internal ribs to provide insulation and impact protection and incorporating an activated charcoal filtration system which removed exhaled carbon dioxide and added oxygen with an endurance of around six hours.

Lynx

Elapsed time: 192 minutes.

As before, she was thankful of the heavy rain which provided concealment.

With her machine pistol 'at the ready' and fastened to her chest, Mina turned westwards, moving gingerly, at a crouch, feeling with each foot in turn for a firm footing. Travelling mostly on all fours, she was scrabbling rather than walking, using her gloved hands to break her fall each time she slipped or tripped. With the additional burden of her heavy rucksack, it was exhausting.

As an alternative, she tried forcing her legs through the heavy scrub at the sides of the path. The resistance caused her thigh and calf muscles to ache, risking cramp and soon changed back to boulder track which was marginally less tiring and slightly faster.

After a while, Mina got into a slow rhythm, moving like an automaton, her mind occupied by the thought that Alfa might have alerted the occupants of the igloo pod.

Another blurred outline loomed into view on her visor screen.

Holding her machine pistol at the ready, primed to fire, she crept towards Charlie, removed her left glove and tested his pulse. The skin inside his wet shirt was cold and clammy. She held her cheek to his lips. He was no longer breathing. Checking his eyes with her iPhone beam, she saw the familiar blank stare of the dead.

Charlie appeared to be in his late teens with a still boyish face and a light, fairish/gingery designer stubble and a long hooked nose with a bulbous tip and wide nostrils.

Using her iPhone torch at low power, she took mug shots and a short video clip for her report to GBG.

Running through her routine, she retrieved and stowed the red tipped kill dart then checked his pockets and frisked his clothing expertly before searching his rucksack, probing his supply of clothing and the last of his food and drink expecting to find drugs.

No weapons, no passports, no other form of ID.

No cash or cards.

No mobile phone.

No hard drugs but a mixture of wads of Betel Quid and Nicotine chewing gums in various flavours.

His rucksack contained a rectangular block of 200 Marlboro cigarettes (unopened) wrapped inside a plastic shopping bag.

To be certain, she repeated her search of Charlie.

Lynx

No hidden IDs, cash or cards, no hard drugs.

No weapons except two knuckledusters and two flick knives, one large and one smaller, palm sized with a quick draw wrist pouch, almost a toy but probably deadly if used to slash a throat or groin.

She double checked his wrists and ankles for needle marks - nothing.

Suspicious, she rechecked his bulky parka jacket for a third time and found a hidden pocket inside the cuff of his left sleeve which contained a thumb drive. She slipped into a tiny padded waterproof pouch ¹⁰ to isolate it from external influences, hoping the Lab 5 team at GBG might be able to unlock its secrets. Perhaps it contained the codes for Bitcoin or some other cryptocurrency?

Zippering Charlie into his sleeping bag, she dragged him over the rubble track in the direction of the gorge and left him hidden in the undergrowth, noting his GPS coordinates for later when she would drag him to the gorge for final disposal.

Back at the track, she checked Charlie's corpse was invisible both to the human eye and on her visor screen.

Risking her iPhone on daylight mode, she made a detailed check of his night lay-up spot to be sure there was nothing to reveal his presence or her visit.

With Charlie's rucksack over her left shoulder, she moved off at a low crouch, scrabbling as before.

Her inspection of Bravo resulted in an almost identical outcome.

A heavy-set man in his early thirties with an unkempt beard. Same parka, same low quality sleeping bag as used by Charlie and Ahmed. From an identical left cuff pocket she removed a thumb drive. Same make as Charlie's. She placed it in a second Faraday pouch.

She found an bagged the red kill dart.

Her body search revealed nothing to identify him except Scorpion tattoos on the back of each hand, one red (right) the other black.

She searched his rucksack.

No guns just a much larger machete sized flick knife.

¹⁰

Mina carried a selection of these pouches in various sizes, prenumbered, A1, A2, A3B1, B2, B3.

Lynx

No IDs, no money, no drugs, no Marlboro cigarettes but a large plastic bag of Quid and Nicotine chewing wads.

Same cheap clothing and poor quality food and drinks cans.

Comparing Bravo's mug shots with Charlie's she detected a similarity, the same long hooked nose with wide nostrils and a bulbous tip. Where they half-brothers or cousins?

As with Charlie, she zipped Bravo into his sleeping bag and stowed him beyond the track, hidden in the scrub, recording his GPS coordinates for the tidy up phase to come later.

Bravo and Charlie were hired muscle, she concluded, probably only vaguely aware of what they were involved in.

Clearly Alfa was the main man in this group of hostage takers.

Elapsed time: 235 minutes.

Mina again faced eastwards and cupped her ears, hearing only the steady patter of the rain falling vertically, making puddles between the increasing sprinkling of sharp, jagged rocks dotted among the smooth rounded boulders.

With her machine pistol fastened against her chest, its safety "ON", she turned and set off through the downpour, dragging both rucksacks behind her while using her right hand to steady herself as she stumbled forwards. On this section of the track, the boulders were larger and more rounded. The going was brutal, exhausting.

Breathing heavily, she stopped and stood up. This was a wrong approach. The rucksacks were peripheral. Alfa was her prize. She must reach him as quickly as possible the call for the evacuation helicopter.

With a rucksack lifted high in each hand, she moved sideways into the deep undergrowth, towards the gorge. After ten paces, she dropped them. Forcing them down out of sight, she recorded their GPS coordinates.

From her earlier rifle sighting system records, she judged Alfa was only around a hundred metres away. With her role in the hostage rescue nearing completion, she was feeling confident, bubbly, re-energised.

Unencumbered, with her machine pistol in her right hand primed and ready to fire, Mina began to progress more quickly, picking up pace, the left side of her brain already drafting a first outline of her 'mission success' report for GBG.

Her left foot skidded: she stumbled forward and slammed to the ground.

Lynx

To protect her weapon hand, she instinctively twisted to land on her left shoulder. Her head smacked into the edge of a sentinel close to the side of the track. Mina landed face down at its base, curled into a foetal position, merged into the undergrowth.

Time passed.

The wind picked up.

As another storm brewed, the rain came in gusts, varying in intensity.

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Climbing back up to consciousness, Mina heard the sound of high-pitched engines being revved.

Trail bikes?

Three?

Stationary.

Nearby.

Very close.

The rain had eased - not helpful.

Mina resisted the urge to move her hand to feel for her weapon.

A deep angry bass voice spoke in street Russian:

'Fuck, we must have missed them. This track is crazy. This rain is shit. Thank fuck it's easing off. Let's double back.'

A lighter voice, a baritone, rougher, the voice of a heavy smoker, said:

'I'm going to enjoy cutting the balls off that Albanian bastard when I get him. What a fucking dope. I bet this is all a big mistake. I bet he hit the emergency button by accident. We should've stay back at the pod and left him to solve his own problem, if there even is one.'

The man hacked up phlegm and spat it out.

'No, let's keep going. He'll hear us coming and signal with his phone torch'.

Lynx

This from a lighter more cultured tenor voice, speaking in 'posh' Moscow Russian.

'You do realise we have to get that boy or it will be us who will be castrated. And hey, Ivan, no smoking that stuff. That's a last warning. Do it again and I'll dock you a month's wages.'

The three bikes re-started and moved off, slipping and sliding over the boulders, using their feet to keep their balance. It was a slow progress but not as exhausting as walking.

Mina eased herself up and watched until their headlamps faded as they rounded a corner and the sound of their engines diminished, becoming an intermittent whine in the darkness.

Standing fully upright she checked herself over, testing for breakages and sprains, concluding that, apart from a dull ache above her left ear, she was able to function normally.

Elapsed time: 277 minutes.

She had been out of action for around forty minutes.

As if someone had turned off a giant valve, the rain stopped completely and a soft breeze began to blow from the direction the trail bikes had taken. She sniffed - oily exhaust fumes, old-fashioned two stroke engines.

There was silence - their bikes had been powered off.

How far was she from Alfa - seventy metres? - maybe less?

Rising to her feet she adjusted her night-vision goggles, relieved they were still functioning. She checked her weapon by initiating an automatic system audit. It returned five green stars to her iPhone app - all good.

Tightening the straps on her rucksack she compressed it into the tight-to-body mode she had used earlier when traversing the gorge. If she fell again she would try to curl and roll onto her back and let the air pads of the rucksack take the impact.

Adopting a more upright stance, forcing her legs through the vegetation at the side of the track, she picked up pace, praying her feet did not snag on a stray root and bring her crashing down again with the risk of revealing her presence.

Lynx

On the breeze she smelled the strong pungent smell of marijuana ¹¹ .

Dropping to her hands and knees Mina began to crawl towards the source.

Using her night sight binoculars from behind a larger boulder, she saw three men and three trail bikes.

Her mind was churning, evaluating possibilities, creating alternative scenarios.

Mina edged closer until she was about thirty metres away, kneeling behind a sentinel.

Shrugging out of her rucksack, she retrieved the weapons pouch and reconfigured the machine pistol back into a sniper rifle, changed the compressed air cassette to a low power close-range version and loaded three darts into the breech, two red kill darts and a green sleep dart for Serge who would be a more valuable asset than Alfa, she reasoned.

A huge man, a monster around two metres tall, was crouched over Alfa, slapping his face, tugging at his ears, tweaking his broken nose. In the near silence, the brute's voice carried to Mina.

'Fucking Albanian dopehead,' said the bass voice. 'He's overdosed, the stupid bastard. Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Why did we not use our own people, eh?'

He stood back, aiming a toecap at Alfa's crotch.

The smallest of the three Russians screamed:

'No! We need him alive so he can tell us where the boy is!'

The smoker's voice drawled lazily:

'Looks like his two mates have taken the boy and scarpered. Let's face it lads, they could be anywhere. In fact they could be watching us, laughing their heads off and we would never know. Fuck it Serge, let's do this bastard and head back to the pod . . .'

'Ivan, for the last time, stop smoking that weed, ok?'

¹¹ "Marijuana" usually refers specifically to parts or products of the cannabis plant that contain enough THC (tetrahydrocannabinol) to cause a psychoactive "high," typically the dried flowers, leaves, stems, and seeds used for recreational or some medical purposes.

"Marijuana" usually refers specifically to parts or products of the cannabis plant that contain enough THC (tetrahydrocannabinol) to cause a psychoactive "high," typically the dried flowers, leaves, stems, and seeds used for recreational or some medical purposes.

Lynx

This sharp reprimand from the cultured tenor voice, the small one who seemed to be in charge:

'Can't you get it? We need you sharp, not spaced out.'

'Look Serge, admit it, this is a fucking hopeless situation,' wheedled Ivan. 'But look on the bright side. Thank fuck the rain has stopped, eh? So why don't we get Tomaz to launch the drone from the pod and send it here to search for the boy using its infrared sensors. Hey, what do you think Dimitri?'

'Yeh, sounds fucking good to me', growled the deep voice. 'Let's face it, Serge, if we try to move off this fucking crazy shit path into that crazy shit bushy stuff, we might easily break a fucking leg or twist an ankle. I'll tell you straight, Serge, I'm not up for it. Yeh, Ivan's idea is spot on. We need the drone here to find them. And that weasel Tomaz will only do it if you authorise him, right?'

'I'm not sure he has enough of those special fuel cells left,' replied Serge, 'remember, we need the drone to contact Control using the satellite.'

'Yeh', said Ivan, 'Tomaz's fucking drone has been a disaster from the outset. Piece of shit. Why can't we make them like the ones the Ukrainians got from the Germans?'

'You know why, don't you?'

'Yeh, yeh, yeh - *Afford-a-fucking-ability*,' said Ivan.

Serge, the smallest Russian, a petite dapper man with a goatee beard, clad in an oversized Barbour hunting jacket, turned away from the other two and picked his way towards Mina. With his back to his colleagues, he urinated into the vegetation, offering himself as a perfect target.

However, to prevent a possible messy shoot-out, Serge would have to wait until she had dealt with the other two first.

Mina picked out Dimitri, a huge man with a full beard, sitting on a boulder, smirking at Ivan who was sprawled on the edge of the track with his back against a taller boulder, blowing smoke rings, his long legs crossed at the ankles, with one heel balanced precariously on a smaller boulder.

Mina waited. Her plan was to take down Dimitri first, then Ivan and then claim her trophy.

While zipping up, Serge shouted over his shoulder:

'Okay guys, I'll try Tomaz, see what he can do for us.'

Lynx

Dimitri turned to look at Serge.

Mina found the spot she had been waiting for, just below his right ear.

The 'target acquired' light pulsed green.

She whispered 'yes'.

Already dead, Dimitri's head slumped forwards.

Ivan was on the other side of the path, just beyond the corpse of Dimitri, his head craned forward, concentrating, rolling another joint, anxious not to lose any of his strands to the breeze.

Mina found the nape of his neck below his ear and whispered 'yes'.

The smoker slipped sideways onto his side, also dead.

Mina refocused on Serge who was washing his hands using water from his drinks flask.

He reached into his jacket pocket and brought out his phone.

The 'target acquired' light pulsed green and Mina whispered 'yes'.

Serge's knees gave way and he pitched forward clutching his mobile phone.

Carrying her rucksack in her left hand with the rifle slung over her shoulder she moved carefully through the scrub.

Reaching Serge, she stooped and fumbled under his body.

An iPhone 10, a basic version, capable but superseded by her iPhone 16 Pro which had been enhanced by the tech team at GBG.

She powered it down, delved into her rucksack for a padded waterproof Faraday pouch, placed Serge's iPhone inside, isolating it, rendering it inert until it reached GBG where its security would be breeched and its data harvested. She zipped the pouch into an inside pocket of the Barbour.

Mina was certain she had prevented Serge's intended call to Tomaz but none the less, worrying thoughts began to unsettle her.

Was Tomaz expected to maintain regular contact with Serge?

How many were in the igloo pod?

Lynx

Or did the Russians have a backup team nearby that Tomaz might call up to investigate if Serge failed to check-in?

Or would Tomaz take it upon himself to send his drone to investigate?

Mina found the green sleep dart, bagged it then rolled Serge onto his back and applied one-shot plastic handcuffs to his wrists and ankles, adding a snap-on strap between both sets of cuffs to create a carry loop to be used to hoist him up into the helicopter.

She frisked Serge meticulously and removed his possessions:

Two thumb drives, (same make as the three hostage takers).

An MP-443 Grach, current FSB standard issue with a polished leather holster imprinted with the letters S A R.

A large alligator skin wallet bulging with high denomination notes in various currencies plus twelve credit and three debit cards in a selection of names (presumably false) issued by different well-known international banks.

A push-out strip of ten 100 mg Sumatriptan ¹² tablets, six remaining.

No passports, no other IDs.

Other sundry items including a perfumed silk handkerchief embroidered with the letters S A R.

She videoed these key items for her report without comment, returning them to his person, closing and zipping each pocket in turn. Mina was anticipating Serge would be uplifted with Ahmed in place of Alfa. If so, GBG would repeat a further more thorough body search later.

Moving on to Dimitri and Ivan, she confirmed both were dead.

She was surprised that neither man carried a weapon, not even a knife. Perhaps Serge did not fully trust them.

Although Mina was worried about Tomaz and his drone, she forced herself to follow her protocol, taking mug shots for her report and accelerating the search procedure by stripping Dimitri and Ivan naked, shredding their clothes (no thumb drives were found), no IDs, no phones.

¹²

The strongest migraine medicines are typically triptans, with Sumatriptan being a first-choice triptan for many.

Lynx

She loaded each man's meagre personal possessions into separate coded Ziplock bags and put them into their small trail bike backpacks for GBG to sift in due course.

As part of the clean-up process, she would jettison their corpses in the gorge later.

For her report, she took mug shots and recorded video clips of their naked corpses back and front, covering their genitals with scraps of clothing.

She moved to Alfa who slept on, gasping in urgent gulps through his mouth which hung open, revealing poor teeth with many fillings and a single gold replacement incisor, oversized.

Unlike Ahmed who had been mostly protected inside his sleeping bag, Alfa had been lying on the track, unprotected from the storm. From her Morzine first aid training, she assessed Alfa as "critical", chilled, possibly hypothermic, at risk of catching pneumonia, details she would highlight in her report.

She frisked him thoroughly.

Same parka as Bravo and Charlie, same cuff pocket, same make of thumb drive with a red and black logo.

She depowered his Samsung Galaxy (older model) and his Garmin GPS, adding them to a Faraday pouch beside his thumb drive then placed the pouch in his rucksack to be sent to GBG for forensic interrogation.

In a deep pocket inside his parka (no holster), she found his Makarov PB ¹³ and three spare cartridge cassettes. She unloaded the weapon and sniffed, judging it had never been fired. She added these items to his rucksack which she would send to GBG.

In a vest pocket of his shirt she found a push-out strip of pink ecstasy ¹⁴ tablets, three remaining.

For completeness, she took mug shots and a video clip for her report.

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The Makarov PB is prized for its simplicity, reliability, ease of manufacture and moderate stopping power. Its distinctive 9*18 mm cartridge features a bullet diameter of 9.27 mm with a rimless case length of 18 mm which prevents cross-use with Western 9 mm weapons.

It remains a favourite with the Russian gangsters.

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3,4-Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA), commonly known as ecstasy (tablet form), and molly (crystal form) is an entactogen with stimulant and minor psychedelic properties.

Lynx

Elapsed time: 291 minutes.

At last, after nearly five hours since accepting her challenge, it was time to update GBG and request the evacuation helicopter.

Sitting on her rucksack with her back against the opposite side of Alfa's boulder, she compiled her report, checked it over, tweaking it until satisfied before uploading it to the satellite, heading for Lab 5 at GBG in Glasgow.

Snacking on an energy bar and sipping from a carton of concentrated orange juice, she rolled her shoulders to relieve tension and smiled, satisfied with the outcome of her mission so far but still anxious about what Tomaz might be thinking and planning back at the igloo pod.

Would he send up his drone?

Would he call in reinforcements if Serge did not make contact.

Would they hunt for their missing colleagues using armed drones or a search helicopter?

It was a loose end situation which ran against the grain of Mina Sverdlovsk's tidy mindset.

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Mina had expected her mission support group at GBG to take around an hour to digest and discuss her report before responding and was surprised when, after only ten minutes she was invited by SMS message to join a secure satellite voice only conference.

On completion of the log-in process, she was put through securely to Ms Celeste Hopkins and invited to **briefly** summarise what had happened since she accepted the mission.

From past experiences, Mina suspected that there would be others listening but remaining silent during her ninety second review.

Adopting her GBG persona, Ms Hopkins responded to Mina's highlights in a Welsh lilt:

Mary, from your report we have your GPS coordinates for Serge and have confirmed from this transmission that this is your present location, is this correct?

'Yes, I am here with Serge and Alfa, both sedated. The four others are inoperative. Ahmed is safe in an RTP about two hundred metres away. His GPS coordinates are in my report.'

Lynx

Good work. The helicopter is being readied as I speak.

'My worry is that Tomaz may send a drone to look for me. There is an outside possibility that Serge sent him a message giving this location.'

Since the storm cleared we sent out a drone to watch the igloo pod and have not detected any activity, so far. However, there is always the possibility of a follow-up action by the Russians directly from their Control Centre which we believe is in Belarus.

Since Ahmed is safe for the moment, he is now a secondary priority.

Our first action is to take possession of Sergio Alessandro Romanov and to examine his phone and thumb drives. He trained originally as an accountant and has a role in procurement for the FSB. He has strong links with the Chinese mafia operating in Europe. Our American friends advise he is a close ally of VP.

The ETA for your helicopter is eight minutes.

Please ready Ahmed and assemble the Albanians' equipment and possessions for the helicopter's second lift.

As you have suggested, we no longer need Alfa, only his Samsung and thumb drives and other equipment. Please dispose of him.

When you have tidied the scene, your mission is over and you can head back to Bratislava and onwards to Morzine.

Mary, once again you have provided GBG with an excellent outcome. Well done.

Do you have any questions or suggestions?

'Would you like me to try to disable the their igloo pod, take it out of action.'

Mary, that is a generous offer. Yes, please.

Actually, I have a suggestion . . .'

Lynx

Second Strike

Armed with the batch of plastic explosives and sundry bits and pieces delivered to her by the evacuation helicopter when it returned for Ahmed, Mina Sverdlovsk was following the plan she had discussed and developed with Ms Hopkins.

Using her iPhone torch, she had inspected the three trail bikes and selected the most modern, topping up its fuel tank from another bike.

Dimitri and Ivan and the two other bikes were hidden in the undergrowth. Alfa had been dispatched with a kill dart and was laid out beside the two Russians for later disposal in the gorge.

To create space for the explosives and other items delivered by the helicopter, Mina had reconfigured the contents of her rucksack, stowing her displaced items inside her sleeping bag, zipped to make it waterproof, added it to her newest temporary cache. Noting its GPS coordinates, she returned to the track and checked the area carefully to ensure it was clear and clean then reset her mission timer.

Elapsed time: 00:00.

With the GPS coordinates for the igloo pod in her iPhone, she kick-started the trail bike and headed eastwards along the path towards the igloo pod, using her feet to correct her skids and slips. It was slow going initially but over time her technique improved. It was a bit like downhill skiing, and not nearly as tiring as scrabbling over the irregular boulders on foot.

When the rain began to fall more heavily, she abandoned her infrared goggles, relying on her eyes alone. In this downpour, Tomaz's drone would probably be grounded, she reasoned.

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At half a kilometre short of the igloo pod, her iPhone vibrated on pre-set, responding to its preset GPS coordinates.

Stowing the trail bike in the undergrowth for later use she continued on foot.

About three hours before dawn, her iPhone informed her she had arrived adjacent to the pod to the igloo pod.

Elapsed time: 79:43.

Using her iPhone torch at low power, she took time to check her clothing and equipment before making her way through the waist deep under growth, moving warily in the poor visibility until she reached the rim of the gorge.

Lynx

At first it seemed there was nothing to see. *Had GBG sent her the wrong coordinates?*

Using her special forces binoculars which incorporated a camera linked to her iPhone, she took time to study the area carefully, switching back and forwards between 'night vision' (light gathering image intensification) and 'infrared' modes.

At first, due to the heavy rain, the huge dome had been almost impossible to spot, revealed only by the faintest glow in infrared mode becoming clearer as her eyes and brain tuned in to the information provided by her binoculars.

About fifty metres below her, the camouflaged hemisphere was wedged into the gully, straddling the rushing water further below. She used the calibration feature on her binoculars to gauge its size at about ten metres diameter across its flat base. A large hook-loop on its top confirmed it had been lowered into place by a heavy lift helicopter.

From her current viewpoint there was no obvious entry/exit hatch. After many minutes of checking, she concluded it must be located either on the flat underside or, more likely, on the far side of the pod. Crucially, there was no sign of any security cameras on the pod but she knew these devices could have been 'planted' in the vegetation nearby.

Moving sideways along the rim of the gorge she settled at a second lay-up point to the left of the igloo pod, repeating her slow checking, concentrating on the rim of the pod, expecting to see some indication of a hatch.

Incongruously, guided by her peripheral vision, Mina spotted the catenary loop of a fluorescent yellow rope ladder snaking upwards through the rain until it disappeared below her, out of her line of sight. On her hands and knees she scrabbled slowly along the edge of the gully until she found the upper end of the ladder firmly anchored with driven stainless steel pins. There was a heavy mallet and spare anchor pins nearby beside a dismantled tripod and an untidy heap of blue nylon hoist rope. Beside the tripod there was a detachable extending arm with four retracted sleeved sections giving an overall outward reach of about four metres to a pulley arrangement completing the hoist.

This was how they had raised their trail bikes up to the rim.

Who had made the initial gorge crossing to make the first ascent to this point?

Had it been Ivan? Surely not Dimitri and certainly not Serge.

Clearly the Russians would have had to establish a means to transfer their hostage to the pod. Would it have been down to the giant Dimitri to act as a porter with the boy carried in a harness on his back. Had he also carried Serge across?

From folk lore gleaned during her ascent of Everest, Mina knew Tibetan sherpas had often carried injured clients on their backs when expeditions hit trouble.

From her large rucksack Mina removed a lightweight camouflaged backpack containing six 2.5 kg charges of plastic explosives, each contained in hemispherical housings topped

Lynx

by thumb-sized stub aerials for their detonators. To attach to their targets, the circular bases had pads with peel off covers over an all-weather adhesive stronger than a welded joint, a compound developed originally by NASA for their Shuttle program.

Mina added a few selected items from her own rucksack then cinched the straps of the backpack to hold it tight to her body to reduce the swinging motion during her descent. Dissatisfied, she reorganised the backpack, placing the six circular bases at its inner surface, resting against her back, packing them in place with a lightweight fleece she used for 'layering up' before catnapping. This new arrangement proved much more comfortable - one less distraction.

Ready to proceed, she donned her infrared goggles but quickly discarded them as useless in the heavy rain. Instead, she attached an unlit headtorch to her helmet and slung a pair of basic goggles around her neck for eye protection from the thick scrubby bushes she knew she would encounter around the base of the ladder.

It was time to implement the sabotage plan as suggested by Ms Celeste Hopkins.

Elapsed time: 93 minutes.

With her weapon configured in machine pistol mode and held in place against the smaller backpack by Velcro straps, she reached for the third rung of the ladder and gave a long hard tug, hoping it was not alarmed. Checking carefully and slowly with her special binoculars, there was no sign of a reaction from the pod or in the area around it. She repeated the test, yanking again and again to be certain the ladder was secure at its footing. A further visual check of the pod and its surroundings revealed nothing untoward.

Taking a deep breath, Mina grabbed the sides of the ladder with both gloved hands, swung a leg over, found a rung and began her descent to the pod, moving as quickly as she dared while swaying wildly from side to side. Occasionally twirling upside down, she made slow progress. The strain on her arms and legs was immense.

At least I'll be hard to hit if they shoot at me.

At the completion of her descent, she crouched beside the ladder anchor points, her machine pistol at the ready, its breech loaded with thirty kill darts and a high pressure ultra-rapid fire cannister.

Hindered by a fine mist of thrown spray she sensed the presence of the igloo pod looming high above her, perhaps forty or fifty metres away.

Engulfed in the intense cacophony caused by rushing water, poised on high alert, she waited motionless, knowing she would be unlikely to see or hear an enemy approaching until the last second. Nor would they see her.

Elapsed time: 105 minutes.

Lynx

Confident she had arrived at her first waypoint undetected, her senses were adapting to the nocturnal bedlam. The heavy rain was easing and visibility was improving, making the next stage of her attack more achievable.

Feeling the familiar surge of second wind energy ripple through her body, Mina smiled. Checking her immediate surroundings, she found a further length of yellow fluorescent ladder coiled a few metres from the lower anchor point. *What was its purpose?* Nothing came to mind.

Before initiating her attack, it was time to check out alternative escape routes in case she had to make a swift exit.

Using her binoculars, she studied the far side of the gorge, working her way downwards from the top anchor point, where her large rucksack was hidden.

Tuning in, Mina saw there were several relatively easy climbing routes she could use. Using her special binoculars, she took a series of reminder photos, stored automatically in her iPhone.

Although she could not see a natural bridging point or narrowing which would allow her to leap across, she judged there must be one.

Was this the reason they had chosen this spot to land the pod?

If Ivan had succeeded to enable the ladder to be installed then so could she.

Mina grimaced - *at least she would not have to face such a challenge in the darkness, provided she had the ladder.*

The drizzle petered out, leaving only the mist welling up from below. Operating without binoculars, she judged the pod was at least thirty metres above the edges of the gorge below although the torrent itself remained unseen.

With visibility improved, her binoculars were a boon. There was indeed a hatch in the base of the igloo pod. It was about a metre in diameter with a beam of light projecting downwards through a small porthole into the abyss.

Had this porthole been used to guide the heavy lift helicopter when positioning the pod?

Was this hatch how the occupants entered and exited?

To Mina, this did not make sense as they would have to swing across Tarzan style to reach terra firm at the sides of the gorge.

Was this the reason for the spare length of rope ladder? Had Ivan used it to swing across the void to the other side rather than use a grappling hook?

The entire weight of the huge hemispherical dome was supported in a level position by four adjustable hydraulic legs resting on claw feet.

Lynx

Before proceeding with her attack, Mina took an detailed video clip for her report, adding a whispered commentary explaining how she planned to get her explosive charges into position.

Elapsed time: 124 minutes.

Wearing her protective goggles, she tightened the wrist bands of her gauntlets before climbing through the thick undergrowth, moving obliquely at a steep angle, heading for the nearest leg. In the darkness with only the spotlight beam from the hatch to orientate herself, she was moving by feel, groping ahead, making sure she tested each new handhold by tugging and twisting to be sure it would take her load before releasing her anchoring hand to repeat the groping process, negotiating past each rocky outcrop in turn by a series of minor detours, acutely aware a slip would mean almost certain death by drowning - if she survived the fall.

Although the distance covered was only around fifty metres, the short traverse was exhausting and frightening in equal measure. At the base of the leg she attached herself to it by wrapping a holding cord around the base and clipping it with a snap lock stainless steel carabiner to the reinforced eyelet on the front of her onesie coverall.

With both feet firmly fixed to the splayed claw feet, Mina eased herself backwards clear of the leg to get a good view of the double hatch arrangement, using her iPhone to take a series of photos. Now she was closer, she saw this circular hatch was set in the centre of a larger hatch about two metres square. The gap around the edge of the square hatch was very narrow, tightly sealed, suggesting it opened upwards, into the pod. Re-checking, she realised the rim of the circular hatch protruded with a raised edge bedded by a gasket onto the flat underside, indicating it opened outwards.

As she knew from training, modern doors and hatches which opened inwards relied on locks attached to the inner surface and were inherently weaker than those opening outwards and sealed against the outer surface.

The puzzle was how to reach the square hatch to attached explosive charges. During her SAS training she had used magnetic handholds to swing herself across to a target. In any case, she judged this pod was made of aluminium for lightness.

Perhaps she could use the spare section of ladder and swing across the void?

Keeping the safety cord in place in case she slipped, she climbed to the top of the leg, removed the protective backing from the base of an explosive charge and pressed it into place beside the welded bracket which fixed it to the underside of the pod, another point of weakness.

She repeated the process, pressing a second explosive charge in place beside another weld then took record photographs for her report.

Lynx

Back at the base of the leg, she had a good view of the next leg, similarly embedded against the side of the gorge.

Continuing towards the next claw foot, she saw light shining onto the vegetation ahead of her. Moving closer, she saw another similar double hatch arrangement with a porthole, confirming her earlier speculation. It was set low on the curved side of the pod, just above the base, positioned centrally between the legs, close to the face of the gorge.

Using her iPhone spotlight, she saw the adjacent undergrowth was damaged and flattened. Clearly this was where the three Russians had exited the igloo dome with their equipment to take possession of the boy Ahmed.

She resisted a sneak peek through the porthole, instead using her sighting lens in wide-angle mode to take a short video clip for her report. Viewing the clip on her iPhone revealed an untidy interior with four office type chairs on roller feet and a huge plasma screen playing a Harry Potter movie with inaccurate Russian subtitles.

Slumped in one of the seats (asleep or drunk?) was a tall thin man with a blonde ponytail - presumably Tomaz. In the far corner, there was a chemical toilet cubicle.

During a second review in slo-mo she spotted four camp beds and a circular dining table near a small galley kitchen. Nearby there was a tall canister of propane and at its base four large Gerry cans of petrol, fuel for the trail bikes. Below the TV screen there was a shelving unit stacked with electrical batteries linked to a transformer feeding a distribution board on a stand with cables routed directly across the floor powering various pieces of equipment.

How did their ventilation system work? There was nothing evident.

Perhaps they opened the side hatch while cooking and the bottom hatch to jettison rubbish into the gorge?

Mina Sverdlorsk made her decision.

Holding firmly onto the vegetation, she placed her remaining four explosive charges at the corners of the square hatch. She took a record video for her report.

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Elapsed time: 142 minutes.

With all six explosive charges in place, Mina made her way back to the base of the ladder and began her swaying climb to the upper edge of the gorge to retrieve her large rucksack, thankful to be relieved of her earlier weighty burden and buoyed by the hope that she was on the home strait.

Lynx

To cover her tracks, she tied the tripod hoist to the top rung of the ladder, using Charlie's pouch knife to slice through the cords tied to the anchor spikes and watched as the hoist and ladder snaked off into the darkness.

Elapsed time: 173 minutes.

Back at the track, she kick-started the trail bike and headed westwards through the light rain, her next waypoint set for Charlie's GPS and set off heading westwards, towards Bratislava.

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Twenty minutes into her journey Mina sat astride the silent trail bike and sent an encrypted message to GBG confirming the charges were in place, attaching her record photos and videos, suggesting that GBG first detonate the two charges on the leg with the intention of forcing the hatch closer to the cliff face prior to activating the four others, thus increasing the blast effect on the square hatch in the hope of shredding the interior of the pod and detonating the cans of fuel, gas canisters and igniting the batch of back-up batteries.

Almost instantly, agreement from GBG was confirmed:

No activity at the target.

Proceed as agreed.

Following the plan suggested by Ms Celeste Hopkins, she removed Serge's mobile phone from its Faraday cage, powered it up, held it back to back to her iPhone 16 Pro, bypassing the iPhone 10's security with the software downloaded earlier from GBG.

Mina Sverdlovsk smiled as she tapped in 'Serge's' panic message text to Tomaz via the Russian satellite link, using precise Moscow Russian in the words previously agreed with Ms Hopkins, pleased to have another chance to strike back at Putin and his cronies.

Tomaz, we have the hostage.

The Albanians are dead.

We are at the ladder.

Ukrainian Special Forces are in close pursuit.

Immediate evacuation requested.

Top priority.

Shutting down communications to prevent interception and tracking.

Out.

Lynx

GBG were convinced this ruse would result the in immediate despatch of a heavy lift helicopter to reclaim the pod.

Mina de-powered Serge's iPhone and returned it to its Faraday pouch then kick-started the trail bike and resumed her journey, whistling quietly to herself, satisfied she had succeeded in completing her part of the mission.

She kick-started the trail bike and set off westwards to continue her other clean-up tasks.

Lynx

Loose Ends

With her tasks completed and the rollercoaster of highs and lows behind her, Mina felt the edge of tiredness seep into her body as the adrenaline dissipated and the physical and mental strain she had been under began creep up on her.

Elapsed time: 205 minutes.

In weak sunshine, facing eastwards towards her homeland, sitting astride the trail bike at Alfa's rock as she had named it, she waited, listening intently.

In the distance she heard the low thud-thud of a heavy lift helicopter and smiled.

Later, during her debriefing, she would watch an enhanced version of the video captured by the GBG satellite, the one sent directly to Putin via an untraceable direct email to his personal computer.

It had worked exactly as she had envisaged.

As the helicopter began to lift the refuge igloo pod, the charges on the leg exploded causing the pod and helicopter to lurch badly. The second larger hatch explosion caused a upward blast which sent shards of metal into the helicopter, damaging its fuselage and shredding its rotors and gear box. The helicopter cartwheeled forward into the gorge. Its fuel tanks exploded, creating a false dawn.

Smiling broadly, Mina Sverdlovsk kick-started the trail bike, wheeled it round and headed towards Bratislava and onwards to Morzine.