

Cornelius

by
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About

Cornelius Prinsloo, ex-soldier turned mercenary has spent so much of his adult life killing people that he believes he is a killing machine. His effectiveness as a long range sniper is keeping him busy in Ukraine's international Legion.

Separated from his unit after a successful kill in Russian held territory, he needs to find his way back through enemy lines and really doesn't need any complications.

Escape and evasion

Cornelius, or Corrie, to his friends, ran crouched behind a low wall bordering the road, silently cursing every time his swollen knee made contact with the stock of his his shotgun. He was thankful for the cold, though his joints ached with it. Telling himself for the umpteenth time that he was insane and far too old for such shit, he kept moving, straining to see or hear any sign of movement.

The Russians had reached the village; that much he knew. The Ukrainians were hitting them hard, but they had to keep moving, the Russians had learned quickly and within fifteen to twenty minutes of any reported contact the Russian artillery would start shelling the contact location. Corrie wondered how many of their own soldiers they killed in the process. He carefully made his way towards a burned out filling station, hoping he could lay up there for a while and perhaps make contact with a local unit commander. He still had

some food and ammunition, but he needed to rest up till his knee mended.

He reached the filling station easily enough, but had more trouble finding a way inside without leaving any tracks. Eventually he managed to force open a padlock on a store room behind the filling station. There wasn't much inside; a few empty wooden crates and a drum of what smelled like grease with a broken lever pump dispenser. One of the crates was half filled with wood shavings, the type used sometimes for packaging machinery. Corrie risked his head torch, using a red beam and filtering it with his gloved fingers, to check that there were no nasty surprises in the crate before spreading the shavings around evenly and laying his groundsheet on them.

"Luxury," he told himself as he carefully prepared his sleeping place. Within minutes he was asleep, curled up like a mouse in the crate.

He woke again when he heard them. He lay very still, listening carefully. Whoever they were, they were trying to keep someone from making a noise. Corrie hadn't learned much Russian or Ukrainian, and wasn't sure he could tell the difference, but what he heard didn't need translation. He climbed out of the crate slowly, ignoring the pain in his knee. He holstered his pistol but kept his knife ready. He forced himself not to hurry, making sure all his kit was packed and ready before easing out of the shed.

A light flared briefly; one of them lit a cigarette. The muffled sounds continued, Corrie smelled the cigarette as he crouched low to peer into the opening at the back of the building. It was wide, a roller shutter, perhaps a workshop entrance. It was partially open; to knee height. He could see movement. Pale skin moving in time with the grunts. A red glow as the smoker sucked on the cigarette showed more of him, a booted pair of feet, the smoker's, he was sat on a low table, his back to Corrie with his trousers around his shins.

Perhaps it was the adrenaline; Corrie felt no pain as he moved forward under the shutter on his fingers and boot tips. It took seconds to assess the situation, by which time he knew exactly what he had to do. By the time the grunting rapist was gasping, Corrie was in place and ready. The smoker died quickly, he was

lucky. Corrie left the blade in the back of his skull as he vaulted over the table and kicked the rapist hard in the jaw. He felt his knee protest then, but kept moving. The rapist was making strange gurgling sounds as Corrie clamped his left arm around the rapist's neck in a choke hold and dragged him backwards. Fingers dug into his forearm with desperate strength but Corrie pulled back and pressed his right hand against the back of the man's head, increasing the pressure of the choke hold. Corrie heard a muffled yelp from the woman when he tried to stand. The man's body had gone slack, but he was not taking any chances. He moved his right foot and lifted the dead weight of the man's body, then carried on dragging him backwards, knocking over something that rolled noisily away.

"Inozemnyy volunter," said Corrie quietly, "Ya ne rozmovlyayu ukrayins'koyu. Do not be frightened, do not make a noise." He laid the man down, certain that he was unconscious if not dead. He could see the pale flesh of his naked belly, distended penis and thighs. The woman had not moved.

"I'm not going to hurt you," said Corrie, keeping his voice low as he reached for where he thought her arm was. She flinched, but made no sound. Corrie moved his hand up and behind her shoulder, asking her if she could sit up. He could vaguely make out her pale face as he helped her up. Her hands had been tied behind her back with plastic ties. Corrie could feel that there were at least two sets and they seemed really tight.

"Don't move," he said, "I'm going to cut these off now." He felt in the right side thigh pocket and brought out his wire cutters. He pulled the glove off his left hand with his teeth and used his finger tips to guide the tips of the cutters. The woman hissed as the ties fell away. Corrie knew she would be feeling pain as the blood circulated again. His knee screamed in pain as he got back to his feet again. He stepped carefully around the woman and put his glove back on before moving around the table to recover his knife. He used the knife to make sure the second man was dead before cleaning the knife on the man's jacket. He removed the men's dog tags and went through their pockets. Taking three packets of cigarettes and two plastic lighters. The first man that he had killed had a solid feeling folding knife that Corrie also kept. He had heard the woman

dressing herself while he searched the bodies but she didn't say anything. Corrie covered the lens of his torch with his fingers then used a narrow sliver of red light to find the mens' packs. They had left their weapons with their packs in the corner of the room, which looked like it had been a workshop and an office of sorts.

Corrie took the ammunition, and a tin of food, he had no idea what it was, but it was food. He sensed the woman watching him.

"I am going now," said Corrie, "I am sorry for what these men did to you. They were animals, but I must go before their friends find them. You should get away from here. Is your home nearby?" He spoke slowly and quietly. The woman didn't respond, he could see her outline, dawn was close, "Ya ne rozmovlyayu ukrayins'koyu," he said again, "I do not speak Ukrainian."

The woman made a slight nod. Corrie nodded back and moved towards the roller door, checking that it was safe to leave. The woman followed him silently when he left. Corrie picked up his pack and rifle and moved away from the filling station. He could hear voices and moved away from them. The woman followed him. It took Corrie a while to orientate himself. A dog started barking away to his right. The woman was still following him, but she moved silently. Corrie reached the outskirts of the village, the light of the false dawn allowed him to see well enough to find his way to the main road. The sound of distant automatic weapon fire coincided with the sound of a bicycle heading out of the village. A voice called out. A check point. Corrie used his rifle scope and saw that there were four Russian soldiers at the cross roads. The querulous voice of an older woman. The cyclist.

Corrie turned to look at the woman that had followed him, her face was very pale as she stared back at him, her eyes dark and unreadable. She looked very young; she was just a girl, a child. A raised voice and the sound of a blow. Corrie turned back to study the crossroads with his rifle scope. He moved closer, checking carefully to see how many more there were. There was a vehicle parked just off the road. Corrie moved to his right. The old woman was bending down, gathering items from the road. Potatoes. One of the men laughed and smashed his heel down on a potato, Corrie waited and steadied his breathing as he slid the safety to fire. Two

seconds, he fired. Three shots, four dead. Corrie ran. His knee screamed with every step. The old woman had abandoned her bicycle and potatoes and was crouching in the ditch when Corrie ran past her.

“Get away from here, quickly!” Corrie wheezed at her in English as he stupidly swerved to avoid stepping on her potatoes and felt his knee scream in protest.

The vehicle keys were in the ignition. Corrie swore out loud when he banged his knee on the dashboard. The girl climbed into the passenger seat just as the engine caught. Corrie swore again as he pumped the clutch. The vehicle’s shock absorbers were shot; the vehicle wallowed about as they took off. Corrie had no idea what lay ahead, but he knew he had to get the hell away from the cross roads.

Corrie concentrated on the road, going as fast as he dared, they hit a pothole and he swore again as his knee banged painfully into the dashboard. He glanced at the girl and apologised for swearing. He felt her turn to look at him, but she did not say anything. Behind him the sky lit up as the Russian Artillery obliterated the crossroads.

Corrie managed to stop before they hit the barrier. A mixture of broken farm implements and scrap metal. Voices called out.

“Inozemnyy volunter,” Corrie called out, “Ya ne rozmovlyayu ukrayins’koyu!”

“Get out and keep your hands up!” called a voice.

Corrie knew the drill, he relaxed. They were Ukrainians. Half an hour later someone was feeling his knee, a middle aged man who spoke excellent English.

A brief respite

“There is not much I can do,” he said, “There is nothing broken, as far as I can tell. You need to rest it. I’ll strap it up and give you some painkillers. Alexei will get instructions from our commander, you should speak to him. What can you tell me about the girl?”

Corrie shrugged, “I found her in the next village, Komesk, is it? She has not spoken a word to me.”

The doctor spoke to the girl in what Corrie assumed was Ukrainian. She didn’t respond, but watched quietly while the doctor bound Corrie’s knee. She followed Corrie when he limped off to look for Alexei. A shaven headed youth with bad acne and a nervous tic, took them to the back of a grain shed where several soldiers were sitting around a heavy metal table. Alexei was the only person not wearing a uniform.

“How are you feeling Sergeant?” he asked with a smile as he got to his feet, “Welcome to Speol. You are far from your home, yes? I am Alexei.” He glanced at the girl.

“Call me Corrie, or Cornelius please Alexei,” said Corrie, “I’ll be fine, I just fell and twisted my knee. These things take longer to heal at my age.”

Alexei nodded as one of the soldiers offered his chair to Corrie. It had once been a fancy office chair, but had definitely seen better days. Corrie thanked the soldier and eased himself into the chair.

“We have found somewhere that you can rest,” said Alexei, “Command asked me to thank you. They have confirmed that you succeeded, Petreyovitch is dead, as are two of his senior commanders, you did well. They say your spotter has returned to Kyiv, and they are still trying to contact him to tell him you are alive.” He glanced at the girl again before continuing, “Julian will take you to your quarters, your host does not speak English, in fact, she is a Russian speaker, but you can trust her. Julian will remain with you to translate.”

Julian was the shaven headed youth with bad acne. He offered to carry Corrie’s pack but seemed relieved when Corrie declined. The girl followed, staying close to Corrie. They sat on empty sacks in the back of a farm trailer, pulled by an ancient red tractor, driven by a cheerful looking boy who had to stand to operate the foot pedals. Despite the bumpy ride, Corrie almost fell asleep. They were stopped twice by armed patrols. The second patrol took more

interest in the girl than Corrie, but she ignored them and pressed against Corrie when one of them reached out a hand towards her. Corrie told the man in English to let her be.

“She might be a Russian spy,” replied the soldier in American accented English.

“She is a child and she is with me,” said Corrie, “I take responsibility for her.”

Julian spoke in Ukrainian, his voice sounded strained to Corrie. There was a short heated debate till an older looking soldier in the patrol intervened and allowed them to move on.

“Some Ukrainians are bad,” said Julian, “Not just Russian speakers. Many Russian speakers fight for Ukraine. We are Ukrainian.”

Corrie just nodded.

They had to walk the last few hundred metres to reach a house set back in the woods behind a cemetery. Corrie’s knee had stiffened over the long tractor ride and Julian insisted on taking his pack. Their host, a pleasant looking woman who looked to be about fifty, welcomed them with a wide smile.

“Welcome please my home,” she said, “English finished.”

The house was large, comfortable and surprisingly modern inside. Julian asked Corrie if he wanted to bath. He and the host, Elena, struggled to communicate with the girl, who scowled and refused to speak.

“You should have a bath,” Corrie told her, “It will make you feel better. I can wait till you are finished.”

Julian and the woman repeated what he had said in Russian and Ukrainian. The girl followed Elena without a backward glance.

Meisie

They took to calling the girl Meisie, Afrikaans for 'girl'. She acknowledged the name in as much as she responded when addressed as Meisie. She responded mostly to Corrie, but would sometimes do as Julian and Elena asked. She was not lazy, and did not need to be asked when it came to cleaning and preparing food. She insisted on being in the same room as Corrie. The only exception was when he was in the bathroom, but Corrie suspected she would have followed him in there as well. He thought she was quite pretty, though she tried very hard to hide it. Corrie cleaned and sharpened the knife he had taken from the Russian soldier he had killed. It was a Swiss Army knife and had a decently long blade that locked into place, a pair of scissors, a tin and bottle opener and a flat and star screw driver. Corrie offered it to the girl who took it without hesitation.

After a week they could hear the almost constant rumble of artillery bombardments in the distance. Julian told Corrie that they would be moving soon, and two nights later a car came for them.

Elena seemed quite emotional when she said goodbye. Meisie meekly accepted her embrace. Julian got out when they reached the main road, he shook hands with Corrie and spoke to Meisie, but got no response.

"We take you to your friends, yes. Foreign volunteers," said the woman driving the car. There was a passenger in the front wearing a thick coat with the hood up, who sat very still most of the time, a long, slender hand would occasionally reach up and grasp the handle above the top of the door. They passed through several checkpoints before Corrie heard the passenger speak. It was a woman's voice, and she seemed to be in charge. Nobody questioned Corrie or Meisie

Anton greeted Corrie with a huge smile and his rough humour.

"Fuck me old man, I thought I'd got rid of you at last,"

Corrie just smiled and handed him the cigarettes he had liberated from the men he had killed. The woman got out of the vehicle just as Anton opened the door for Corrie.

“You will be taken to a specialist, Sergeant Prinsloo, we want you to make a full and speedy recovery. Somebody will come for the girl tomorrow or the day after.” She approximated a smile before turning and walking stiffly away. Corrie realised that she was in a lot of pain.

“What’s this then?” muttered Anton, looking Meisie up and down, “A bit young for you isn’t she grandad?”

“This is Meisie,” said Corrie, “She stays with me and you had better watch your language in her presence.”

“You can’t bring her with you!” protested Anton, “Not here, not with this lot of scumbags, they’ll eat her alive.”

Corrie shook his head, “Nothing is going to happen to her, and you are going to help make sure of that. Where can we get some food, I am hungry?”

Meisie pressed against Corrie as soon as they entered the mess hall.

“Just relax, Meisie,” Corrie told her quietly, “Never show fear in front of predators, just pretend that they are all pretty flowers.”

Anton hurried off calling someone’s name. Corrie carried his pack to a table near an exit and asked Meisie to keep an eye on it for him while he fetched them food. She looked vulnerable and alone sitting there at the table, ignoring the men staring at her.

Corrie returned to the table carrying two trays of food. Two young men were trying to get Meisie’s attention. One had British paratrooper wings on his shoulder, the other US Rangers.

“Fuck off now,” said Corrie as he laid down the trays, “And stay fucked off.”

The American grinned and moved away, but the Brit stiffened and looked as if he wanted to get into it with Corrie, then relaxed and moved away with a sneer on his face as Anton approached with two other men.

“You aren’t supposed to fight in the mess,” said Anton conversationally.

“Shit Cornelius, you made it back,” said Podge, “And you brought a friend. How many more Russians did you kill?”

“Never mind that,” said Blake, “Anton says you arrived with the Marshal. Did she tell you what they have planned for us?”

“That woman was Marshal whatsit?” asked Corrie, “Are you certain?”

“Marshal Bilyck,” said Anton, “I recognised her voice. I nearly shit myself when I realised it was her...” he glanced at Meisie, “Pardon my French miss.”

“She never said a word to me till we got here,” said Corrie, “Are you sure that is our commander?”

“When are you going to introduce your friend?” asked Blake.

“Meisie, this is Podge, he works with Blake,” said Corrie pointing with his fork, “You can trust them. This ugly bugger is Anton, you can trust him with anything that you don’t mind losing and your life. He works with me. We are long range snipers. Gentlemen, this is my friend Meisie, she doesn’t like talking and being bossed around.”

“So the Marshal really didn’t talk to you?” asked Blake, “She didn’t thank you for taking out Petreyovitch?”

“We were all part of that operation,” said Corrie, shaking his head, “I just pulled the trigger. It was your plan Blake and it worked perfectly.”

“Except you got trapped,” muttered Blake.

“Well that worked out well too, I made a new friend,” said Corrie. He looked up as a trio of men approached the table.

“You can’t bring your pets in here, Sergeant, this is a senior ranks mess,” said the new face. The paratrooper and ranger that Corrie had told to fuck off were with him.

“This young lady is my guest and you are annoying me,” said Corrie, “I have already told your boyfriends to fuck off and I suggest you do the same.”

“What’s going on here?” called a voice, “Is there a problem?”

Corrie turned to face the voice, “What is this?” he asked, “The Boy Scout’s food hall? The next idiot that gets in my face is going to feel my fist...” He rose to his feet.

“That is enough!” the Marshal’s voice cut through the noise, “Provost, you are to arrest anyone who is not sat at a table eating by the time I have finished speaking. You gentlemen will not brawl in the mess, and that includes you Sergeant Prinsloo. Now sit down!”

She walked stiffly over to their table and told them all to sit when they stood again.

Promotion to Sergeant Major

“Thank you gentlemen,” she held out a package, “This is for you, Sergeant Major Prinsloo. Congratulations. There is a vehicle waiting to take you and your comrades to Lviv for R & R, she nodded towards Meisie, “Including your ward.”

“What’s a ward?” asked Corrie quietly when the Marshal had left the Mess Hall.

“Someone that you have to look after,” said Blake.

Corrie and Meisie got to sit at the front, so that Corrie could stretch his leg out. Meisie fell asleep slumped against him. They stopped for breakfast in a village that looked untouched by the war. Two days later they were presented with medals. Meisie was given two sets of tailored combat uniform and allowed Anton to cut her hair short. She still had not spoken but would nod and shake her head

and sometimes even smiled. She smiled when she stood next to Corrie in her new uniform.

They had two weeks in the hotel. Corrie had physiotherapy and ultrasound on his knee and was given elasticated knee supports that helped a lot. Meisie allowed a female doctor to examine her while Corrie sat outside the door. She emerged forty minutes later looking very pale and unhappy, and clung to Corrie's arm. They went for a long walk and got lost. Corrie told Meisie that he had to return to the front and do his job. She seemed to understand. He said that she would be taken care of in Lviv and that he would return to visit her as soon as he could but he didn't know when that would be. He wrote his name and details in a journal that he bought for her, and asked her if she could read English. She shrugged and then nodded. He asked if it would be OK for him to write letters to her and she nodded. He told her he would like it very much if she wrote back to him, and she shrugged. Corrie heard her sobbing quietly that night and felt like crying himself. It was a new experience for him. Corrie thought of himself as a killing machine. If he felt emotion, it was the elation of a well placed shot, or the anger and frustration of a miss. He had never really examined himself or his emotions before, preferring to suppress them.

Meisie hugged him after breakfast, her face downcast and miserable. Corrie hugged her back, the first time she had allowed him to, and felt her skinny body trembling.

"I will come straight back to you as soon as I can Meisie," he whispered in her ear, then got to his feet and walked away from her feeling wretched.

Behind enemy lines again

They reached Kyiv in time for an air-raid. Two days later Corrie was crawling along the edge of a freezing cold wheat field in a Russian occupied area, after spending two hours studying drone footage with the local area commander, who told him that Elon Musk was a hero of Ukraine.

It was a long shot using a thermal scope. The freezing conditions making it easier to identify their targets through the walls of buildings.

He tapped the side of Anton's boot, three taps, then squeezed past Anton and made himself comfortable. He scoped the target zone making sure he had all the angles right and waited for Anton to signal that he was ready. It seemed to take forever. When Anton tapped the side of his foot, Corrie felt everything else dropping away as his concentration focused. The five shots rolled out smoothly, and then they were moving again, swiftly. Corrie went down as soon as the figures appeared in front of him. He felt bullets passing over head before he heard the roar of automatic fire from Anton. Leaving the Barrett for Anton to bring, Corrie lurched to his feet with the shotgun ready. His breathing and heartbeat loud in his ears he raced forward. Firing twice before going down and to the right.

The silence was deafening.

Anton slid down next to him, grinning madly, "Let's go," he said as the first shell struck.

Podge and Blake were already at the RV when they got there.

"I'm too fucking old for all this fucking running," muttered Corrie.

"Stop complaining you miserable Boer," laughed Blake, "They must have zeroed on the command post, it took a direct hit."

"The chopper went down," said Podge looking grim and pulling off his headset, "We are going to have to leg it again. It's not on, you know - this is the second time in a row."

The ground shook and the sky darkened. Corrie saw a pine tree cartwheeling through the sky.

"Well fuck this," said Anton, "I'm out of here before they nuke the place."

Corrie followed him pulling his gloves back on, his knee was aching again, but he knew it would feel better when he had warmed up. He could hear Blake laughing, probably at Podge's complaining.

The building, a tractor shed by the look of it, looked empty. Corrie's scoped it with the thermal scope. Six men inside, waiting. He and Blake made ready while Podge called it in. Five minutes later they were running again. The building was out of sight when they heard the shells.

It was well past midnight before they stopped. Podge was on the radio before Corrie caught up with them. Blake was scoping the surrounding area. Corrie chose a vantage point and did the same. No bandits.

"There's a patrol a klick west," said Podge, "They've got an armoured car, or we can head north a couple of clicks and they will send a truck for us."

Half an hour later they were in the back of a truck, moaning about the diesel fumes. Corrie dug a bag of peanuts out of his bag and offered them around. He was checking his pack when the truck was blown across the road.

Corrie lay very still. His ears were ringing and his entire body was numb. He tasted blood in his mouth and something hard and sharp was digging into his back. He could not see much, some orange flickering. After a while he realised it was something burning. He managed to wriggle his shoulders, his arms were trapped under his body. He groaned as the pain flooded into his arms, his voice sounded weird.

Alone again

Bit by bit he extracted himself from under the vehicle. Once he was clear of the twisted and mangled canvas canopy he could see well enough. He found bits of his friends and the three Ukrainians that had been in the cab of the truck. His Barrett rifle was wrecked, but Blake's looked OK. He couldn't find Anton's pack or comms device and Podge's was wrecked. The truck's cab was a mangled smouldering ruin.

Corrie had no idea of what time it was or how long it had been since the explosion. He knew on some level, that he would not be thinking clearly and tried to keep himself calm as he methodically checked his person, weapons and equipment. He had no obvious injuries and knew that he had to move away. He spent some time disguising any signs that would show that anyone had survived the explosion, then moved away taking care not to leave any tracks.

Corrie's first thought was to get as far away as possible, but soon after setting off down the road he changed his mind. Anton, Blake and Podge were more than comrades, they had been a team for the last ten years, and were as close to family as Corrie had ever known. He moved off the road and studied the terrain carefully, before setting off to a vantage point. Just before dawn he saw the drone. It circled the wreckage of the truck before heading back the way it had come, from the South East. Corrie ate a little and drank, letting his body rest. This is what he did best. Two vehicles approached, then slowed down as they carefully made their way around the damaged section of road before accelerating away. Corrie didn't bother scoping the occupants, he waited patiently.

He thought back to his first job with Blake and Podge, in Aleppo 2012. They had met in Ankara, at the new Novotel. Corrie had spent the first two months of the year in Nigeria, hunting down Boko Haram leaders in Borno State, Nigeria, contracted to a South African security group SSTEP. Corrie had been quietly flown out of Nigeria after shooting dead the son of a senior state official along with two Boko Haram commanders he was feeding information to. Jan Arbrecht, the SSTEP director gave him a ticket to Ankara and a number to call when he got there.

Blake sounded very British, but was, in fact, American. He sent a taxi to collect Corrie from the airport.

"Welcome to Ankara," he said, getting up from the table and extending a hand, "I'm Blake. Jan Arbrecht said you don't like Yanks. Neither do I, though I am one."

"Arbrecht says I don't like anyone, which is basically true," said Corrie with a grin, "So please don't take it personally."

“What’s your background with the M107?” asked Blake after ordering coffee and baklava.

“ATF recruited and trained me on the Barrett so that I could get inside the Ortello Cartel in Mexico. I did two years in Mexico and Columbia eliminating Hernando Ortello’s rivals before he was taken down.”

“Do you speak Arabic?” asked Blake.

“I hardly speak my own language, Afrikaans, anymore but my English is OK.”

“You were in the Green Jackets and SAS,” said Blake, “What was a Boer doing in the British army?”

“The Foreign Legion wouldn’t take me,” said Corrie shrugging, “Although more Prinsloos died liberating France than fighting the British in the Boer Wars.”

“Any problems with taking down Russian Military advisors, Hezbollah and Iranian Revolutionary Guards?”

“Not as such, what is the deal?” asked Corrie.

“All expenses covered, three hundred US a day on standby, a thousand US a day when we go hot, and you and your spotter keep seventy five percent of any bounties due on the targets you eliminate.”

“I don’t have a spotter,” said Corrie, “Have never used one.”

“If you decide to stick with us, you will need a spotter, but Podge can spot for both of us on this job. He gets thirty five percent of my bounties, I suggest you offer the same.”

“I’m guessing Syria?” asked Corrie.

Blake nodded, “Aleppo, we have eight targets and counting.”

“Who are we working for?” asked Corrie.

“Uncle Sam, but there is also a connection with Israel; they are providing Intel.”

“And the Turks approve?” asked Corrie.

“Let’s just say they have agreed not to pay too much attention to us. Are you up to some target practice this evening? Podge has found a place a couple of hours drive away.”

Corrie spent most of the night finding and eliminating the twelve targets that Podge had set up in a rugged valley. Blake didn’t say a word when Corrie extracted himself after the last target fell; they shook hands. It was a deal. Three days later they were crossing the border into Syria.

A vehicle approached; its gears grinding, it looked Russian. Corrie scoped it and saw the chalked Z, showing it to be part of Russia’s “special military operation in Ukraine.” A drone flew into his field of vision while he was scoping the lightly armoured troop carrier. The cupola clanged open and a pale-faced dark-haired man waved his cap at the drone, before climbing onto the roof of the vehicle and taking a piss. Four men climbed out. Two of them walked over to the wrecked truck and started pissing on what was left of its occupants. One had a light machine gun slung over his shoulder. The drone circled and flew close to Corrie’s position, he hoped it didn’t have thermal sensing. He watched as two more men emerged from the troop carrier. They had left the engine running, Corrie could not tell for certain if there was anyone left in the vehicle, but he was certain that he was close enough to disable it, if needed. The drone circled again and Corrie felt a strong urge to blow it out of the sky. It flew away towards the south east and Corrie started to plan his shots. He took down five of the Russians before they managed to find cover. One took cover behind what was left of the wrecked cab. Another had crawled into a depression where Corrie would have a lot of trouble hitting him without exposing his position, the last one was on his belly, moving towards the troop carrier. Corrie waited, his scope on the troop carrier as he watched carefully for any sign of movement. He was debating changing the

magazine for a full one when the drone returned. Corrie cursed and zeroed in on the drone, calculating carefully he pulled the trigger and held his aim, grunting in satisfaction when the fifty calibre bullet tore the drone apart.

Corrie knew he would have to act quickly. He took out the man that was now running in a crouch towards the troop carrier, then fired two shots at the man sheltering behind the wrecked cab. He changed magazines, and took his time reloading the first magazine hoping that the last man would show himself.

When he had finished reloading the magazine he put three rounds into the troop carrier, then changed magazines again and replaced the rounds he had used. He moved back, following the path he had planned. Keeping away from the road and keeping under cover as much as possible. The explosions sounded close when they came, and he took cover under a small tree. He counted eighteen separate explosions and wondered if the last Russian had survived.

Escape and evasion - again

Corrie had never liked drones, but he really hated them by the time night fell. He found a bicycle in an open sided hay shed, and rode it gratefully along the road, avoiding two vehicles. He was not sure if he was in Russian or Ukrainian controlled territory and cursed himself for not paying more attention to the briefings. He had grown used to Anton dealing with communications and maps. What he did know was that the Russians would most likely execute him if they caught him. They did not like snipers. He never considered ditching the Barrett; not while he still had ammunition for it. He left the road a third time when he heard voices. A foot patrol. He moved deep into a small copse and got down on the icy ground hoping that they did not have any thermal imaging equipment. The foot patrol did not seem to be moving away, and they definitely seemed to be arguing about something. Corrie needed a shit. He crawled out of the copse on his belly, and scoped the patrol. It was a check point.

Corrie contemplated his options, and decided to abandon the bicycle. He moved away from the road till he reached a wide stream, and decided it was safe to take a shit. He followed the stream and crossed two fences before he reached the farmhouse.

He hoped they kept their dogs indoors. He crossed the stream using a narrow metal bridge, and worked his way around the buildings. He realised his tracks could be followed easily, but decided that speed was more important than concealment as he moved around the village and towards the road. Corrie scoped the road beyond the village looking for a checkpoint, but found nothing. He followed the road till just before dawn, and followed a farm track to another open-sided hay shed. He fed himself and made a nest in the middle of the stacked hay bales and slept. He woke when a tractor and trailer arrived with an older man and a young boy. It was a couple of hours shy of midday by Corrie's reckoning. The man and boy chatted happily as they loaded bales of hay onto the trailer.

Corrie was tempted to approach them, but decided against it. Even if they were Ukrainian, he didn't want to endanger them. He ate some more and slept fitfully till dusk. Corrie decided that he needed to wash. There was a half-full barrel of rain water at the corner of the shed. Corrie stripped off and gave his clothing a good shaking before washing with the icy cold water and drying himself with a spongelike towel he had bought from Cape Union Mart in the V&A Waterfront after accepting the job in Nigeria. Corrie wondered what would happen to the money in his bank account if he was killed.

The moon was up by the time he reached the road. The road was quite busy and Corrie spent a lot of time crouched down in the ditch while cars passed. The road rose above the surrounding land, and by midnight, Corrie could see flashes of light in the west, and hear the faint thunder of long range bombardment. To the east he could see the lights of a sprawling settlement. He cursed himself again for not paying more attention to the geography of the area. It was while he was studying the lighted area in the east that he became aware of the rocket launcher. He estimated they were about four kilometres from where he stood and decided to investigate.

The moon had vanished by the time Corrie had reached the rocket battery. Three launch vehicles and two multi wheel drive support vehicles, definitely Russian. Corrie had been hoping to find Ukrainian military. He moved as close as he dared and used his scope to check out the battery. They seemed very confident. He counted twelve men.

An opportunity too good to miss

The M107 had originally been designed as an anti-material weapon, or so Corrie had been told at the Oklahoma range where he had been trained by ATF instructors. He spent an hour moving into position, and another twenty minutes preparing himself and rehearsing the moves till he was certain that he could hit all five targets and be moving away before anyone could spot him. He hoped the blast would deal with the soldiers, because he would not be targeting them, instead he wanted to hit the rockets. Two rounds in each vehicle, thirty seconds of concentrated fire. Corrie felt excited. He calmed his breathing and readied himself. Ten rounds and thirty seconds later he was changing the magazine on the Barrett and moving away. The explosions from the battery had turned night into day, and some of the trees had started burning. Corrie ran and realised that he was laughing. He crawled, exhausted, into a culvert two hours later, dragging a section of plank he had found and fell asleep remembering Blake, who had shown him how to use a plank to sleep above the flow of sewerage in a concrete sewer pipe on the outskirts of Aleppo.

Corrie woke when tanks rumbled overhead around mid day. He counted at least forty and wondered if he had somehow ended up in Belarus or Crimea. He decided that he was going to pay more attention to the maps and geography of the area next time he had an opportunity. He reasoned that he must be heading in the right direction as it was the same direction as the tanks were headed.

The road was quiet when Corrie climbed out of the culvert after dusk. He had spotted a railway track running parallel to the road while the sky was being lit up by the exploding rocket battery and decided that he would walk along the railway track instead of the road.

Several planes flew overhead and he counted four convoys of troop carriers on the road that night. He slid down the embankment twice when he spotted patrols on the road. Just before dawn the sounds of battle grew louder and louder. Corrie felt his bowels turn watery when he realised the scale of the fighting. He pressed on, with mixed feelings.

It was light when he could make out individuals. He got off the tracks and climbed a water tower in a deserted goods yard to scope out the area ahead. Russian tanks and armoured cars were in disarray on either side of the road. Many were burning, very few were moving, but some were still firing, sending round after round into the fields on either side of the road. Corrie watched as a group of three Ukrainians crept along the railway embankment and used an RPG to take out a tank that had already lost a track, but which was firing out across the field.

Corrie checked his weapons, and pack, making sure that his blue and yellow shoulder patches were clearly visible, then set off in the shelter of the railway track embankment towards the Ukrainians.

A drone flew overhead and Corrie resisted the urge to shoot it down. He stopped to assess the situation when he came across four bodies laid neatly side by side on the railway line. Russians, all young. They looked like they had been executed.

A plane flew towards him, flying low and firing at the Ukrainian positions. Corrie dropped to the ground and steadied the Barrett with his elbows on his knees. He fired three rounds before the plane was gone behind him. He changed magazines and replaced the spent rounds before moving forward again.

A Russian armoured car on the road was firing round after round at the railway embankment where a group of Ukrainians were crouched. Corrie fired four rounds into the gunner's view port, silencing the gun. Seconds later two anti tank rounds hit the armoured car and Corrie shot two soldiers as they fled the burning wreckage. He slung the heavy Barrett across his shoulders and raised his hands as he walked towards the Ukrainians.

Friendly forces

"Inozemnyy volunter," Corrie called out, "Ya ne rozmovlyayu ukrayins'koyu!"

"Kneel down and lower your weapon!" shouted a voice in accented English.

Corrie carefully lowered the Barrett then shuffled backwards on his knees as two men approached shouting in Ukrainian.

“Inozemnyy volunter,” Corrie repeated, “Ya ne rozmovlyayu ukrayins’koyu! I don’t speak Ukrainian.”

Corrie’s Barrett, shotgun, pistol and knife were taken, he and his pack were searched before he was escorted by four men.

“Where are you from?” one of the men asked. He had offered Corrie a cigarette, which Corrie accepted and put in a pocket.

“South Africa,” replied Corrie, “Not so cold there.”

The man laughed and translated before asking Corrie why he was fighting for Ukraine.

“I am a soldier,” said Corrie, “And Ukraine needs help.”

“You are an old man,” said the Ukrainian, “War is not a good place for old men.”

“I am an old soldier,” replied Corrie.

One of the others said something and the English speaker translated.

“Simon says you stopped Russian gun and killed two soldiers with rifle only. Is true?” He asked.

“I am a sniper, it is what I do,” replied Corrie.

“But you come alone from Russian occupied area. Perhaps you are NKVD?”

“I was on a mission with others. We destroyed a drone base, but my friends got killed,” said Corrie.

“Commander will decide,” said the English speaker, “I do not want to execute old man.”

It took almost an hour to find the command post. Some Ukrainians called out encouragement to Corrie while others had to be prevented from attacking him. The English speaker explained that some people thought he was an infiltrator.

Corrie was searched and stripped naked before he was allowed into the command post. The commander spoke good English and examined Corrie's papers, then told him to dress himself before handing his papers to a woman and speaking to her in Ukrainian. Corrie was given coffee and some bread and allowed to sit in a corner. Half an hour later Corrie was handed his papers and welcomed. Everybody wanted to shake his hand and he got a lot of hugs too.

Sniper versus sniper

"You are a sniper, yes?" asked the commander, "We can use your skill now."

The woman and two soldiers went with Corrie. The woman spoke excellent English and introduced herself as Anna. She stayed with him when the two soldiers were replaced by an older soldier with bloodied bandages around his head and left hand.

"This man says you must leave your pack here. We have to crawl. Russian snipers are preventing us from moving forward here," she told him. She offered to take some of the ammunition and Corrie's shotgun.

They crawled on their bellies for two hours. Their guide farted almost non-stop the whole way. It was a relief when the woman said they could go no further. The area ahead was the killing ground. Corrie had collected a helmet that he had found along the way. He asked the man to move back and spent some time scoping his surroundings before turning on his back and holding the helmet up on a short piece of plank. He moved slowly along the path, watching the helmet till a bullet knocked it down. Corrie crawled back after retrieving the helmet.

"I need someone to do that again," said Corrie, rubbing mud over the shiny dent on the helmet.

Anna nodded and took the helmet and plank, “I can do that,” she said.

“Wait till I am ready,” said Corrie, “It will take me at least half an hour, then I will whistle, like this..” He whistled a double note and picked up his Barrett. He moved back about twenty metres and slid off on his belly. It was much colder than Aleppo, and the dead bodies were not as ripe, but the adrenaline was much the same. It took almost an hour. Corrie whistled twice and waited. Five minutes later the sniper was dead and his spotter too. They checked but there were no more snipers. The bloodied Ukrainian hugged Anna and Corrie. They were cheered warmly as they made their way back to the command post.

The commander thanked Corrie when he returned, “Marshal Bilyck has asked that you return to Kyiv, I would prefer that you remain with us but...” he shrugged, “We are almost finished here now anyway. Thank you.”

Russians shells had started hitting the outskirts of the city as Corrie and his new guide, Bernard, made their way to the train station. Corrie was handed over to a grim-faced man at the station who ushered him onto the guard van of the train and asked if he was hungry.

“Russians make me angry. Angry make me hungry. I will be fat by end of war!” Muttered the man as he handed Corrie an egg and ham roll. The train started moving just then and the man excused himself and told Corrie to help himself to coffee and make himself comfortable. Corrie slept most of the way to Kyiv. The station was chaos, but the Ukrainian military were expecting him.

Captain and then Major

“Captain Prinsloo?” asked a uniformed soldier, “Marshal Bilyck asked me to find you. I am Corporal Alun.” He saluted smartly.

“I don’t like being saluted Alun, just call me Corrie please?” Corrie needed a toilet, but guessed that the station toilets would be as crowded as the rest of the station. Alun led him to a smart black car

with a driver. Half an hour later Corrie asked if he could use the toilet in the offices he was shown to. A red-faced young woman led him along a corridor to a row of toilets and said she would wait outside for him. She looked even more red-faced when Corrie emerged, shaking his hands dry.

Marshal Bilyck was in a bed. The offices had been turned into a military field hospital.

“Captain Prinsloo,” she said smiling tightly, “Thank you for coming. I apologise for not getting up...”

Corrie waved his hands dismissively, “Please Marshal, do not apologise and please stop promoting me? I prefer to be just me, Cornelius Prinsloo, rifleman. I am very sorry that you are unwell.”

“It is only pain, Cornelius, and hopefully soon over. I am so sorry for the loss of your comrades. You have been spectacularly successful, but the price has perhaps been too high. I have asked Alun to arrange for Major Vesty to debrief you tomorrow and to make sure that you are comfortable. Your ward, Meisie, will be pleased to see you again, she has been brought to Kyiv. I am afraid she has been quite difficult during your absence and especially after we received information that you had been killed.”

Corrie nodded, “It will be good to see her, perhaps I can spend some time in Kyiv? The Russians are getting closer to the city.”

Marshal Bilyck nodded, “Major Vesty has asked for your services; he is part of the Kyiv Defence command, and was a sniper himself. Please excuse me Cornelius, I need to rest?”

The young woman escorted Corrie from the building. Corrie asked her what the Marshal was suffering from and the woman told her that she had bone cancer, and was not expected to live much longer. A driver took him to a small, but very comfortable residential Hotel called the Grenade. Meisie ran out to greet him before the vehicle had stopped. She was followed by a young woman in uniform who introduced herself as Matty. She spoke good English and said she was Polish/Ukrainian and had been assigned to look

after Meisie who now had a name tag; “Maisie Prinsloo” sewn above the left breast pocket of her combat jacket.

Meisie clung to Corrie’s arm. She was smiling but had tears running down her cheeks. Corrie was hungry and asked Matty if the Grenade served food. She told him that lunch had already been served, but said there was a very good café close by where he could get something to eat. Corrie asked Meisie if she would show him the way to the café when Matty said she would take his pack and weapons to their room. Corrie insisted on keeping the rifle with him. He asked Matty if she would like him to order anything for her, and she replied that she would prefer to take a few hours off, it that was alright with him.

Corrie struggled with the Ukrainian menu, but the waitress spoke good English and asked him what he would like.

“I haven’t had a proper meal for days,” said Corrie, “Please can I have something with lots of meat and vegetables, bread and butter and a very big pot of coffee?” he looked at Meisie, “You can order whatever you want, except alcohol.”

Meisie looked back at him and used her finger to point to what she wanted on the menu. It turned out to be a waffle with Nutella and ice cream.

“So you are still not talking, Meisie?” asked Corrie when the waitress had gone. Meisie shook her head and didn’t smile.

“I’m sorry. I would like to hear your voice, but that is OK. I missed you very much. My friends were killed – it was very quick, a bomb I think. It destroyed the truck we were in. I was very lucky. You are the only friend I have left in the world.”

Meisie looked at him but didn’t speak. Corrie reached into his jacket and pulled out a folded wad of paper.

“I did write to you, but I didn’t know how to send the letter. I don’t even know if you have a postal service any more. But here it is, my letter to you.” He handed her the folded papers. Meisie took them and unfolded them, then studied them carefully, working her way

slowly down the page. The coffee arrived before she had finished with the first page. Corrie watched her through half closed eyes over the rim of his coffee cup. The coffee was good. Meisie frowned; she was looking at something at the bottom of the page. Her lips moved as she tried out whatever it was she was reading and her brow cleared when she understood. She finished the page and carefully moved it to the back and started on the next page, she frowned again and looked up at Corrie.

“I write on both sides of the page, look at the back of the first page,” Corrie suggested, “Do you want coffee?”

Meisie nodded and busied herself with the letter again. Corrie poured coffee for her but didn't add milk or sugar. Meisie was still reading when the food came, and didn't touch her waffle or coffee till she had read the five sides of paper that Corrie had written. She carefully folded the wad of paper and put it in her left breast pocket, before smiling widely and reaching for her waffle.

“When I was around your age; I'm guessing you are thirteen or fourteen?” said Corrie, “I used to say Grace - a sort of prayer of thanks before I ate. I had been taught to do that by the Catholic Priests who ran our orphanage. Did you ever do that?”

Meisie looked at him and put down her knife. She closed her eyes and crossed herself, then clasped her hands together for a short while. Her lips moved as if she was about to speak but then she clamped them shut. She opened her eyes and looked at Corrie, then crossed her eyes and stuck her tongue out at him. He laughed and then choked on the piece of bread he had been chewing. Meisie jumped up and banged him on the back till Corrie stopped coughing and asked her to stop.

“Thank you Meisie,” he said smiling, “I do believe in God, but I'm struggling to like him at the moment. I wish he would come and fix this mess between Russia and Ukraine.”

He pointed at the name tag on her jacket, “Did you tell them your name?” He asked, and when she shrugged he added “Do you like the name 'Maisie', it is also the name the girl who played Arya Stark

in the Game of Thrones movies, Maisie Williams. She was my favourite character in Game of Thrones. Have you seen it?”

Meisie nodded, and then tucked into her waffle, avoiding eye contact with Corrie.

They went for a walk after eating. Corrie's rifle seemed to attract a lot of attention, mostly positive. He got to repeat his standard; “Inozemnyy volunter. Ya ne rozmovlyayu ukrayins'koyu!” a lot. One old woman gave him a hug and kissed both his cheeks, saying she was proud to see an old man fighting the Russians. Only one person was openly hostile, saying in good English that he should be at the front and not shirking in the city. Meisie put herself between Corrie and the man, and Corrie thought she was going to speak, but she just glared at the man, who laughed and muttered something that Corrie didn't understand. Corrie put his hand on Meisie's shoulder to calm her down and steer her away and was surprised at how tense she was.

They found a park where there were a few people with dogs. Corrie surprised Meisie when he sat on a swing and started swinging. After a short while they were both swinging and she even laughed a little.

There was a woman waiting for Corrie when they returned to the Grenade Hotel. She addressed him as Major and asked if he had time to go through some documents with her. Mostly it was paperwork concerning the deaths of Blake, Podge and Anton. Blake had contracted them to the Ukrainian Foreign Legion as 4M, and now, with their deaths, that contract was officially ended. Corrie had not bothered himself with the details of the contract, but he read everything carefully before signing. There were generous payments for Blake and Podge's next of Kin. Anton, like Corrie, had no family and had asked that anything owed to him be donated to the Royal British Legion. Corrie told the woman that it would be difficult to repatriate Blake and Podge's remains; they had been blown to pieces. Anton, like himself, had not asked to be repatriated or memorialised. It was a long and tedious process and Meisie quietly endured it all, refusing to let Corrie out of her sight. When she started wriggling uncomfortably he had to order her to go to the toilet and promised he wouldn't move till she returned.

The woman, who spoke her name too quickly for Corrie to catch it; something like Elsmarie, asked if he had managed to get the girl to speak. Corrie said he had not. The woman told him they had been trying to identify her, but that the village that Corrie had rescued her in was under Russian control and they had not received any response from the authorities there. They had tried identifying her with ClearView, a facial recognition program that had been useful in identifying some battlefield casualties but there were no matches. Corrie had heard Podge and Anton discussing ClearView, but had no interest in it. He had learned very early in his contract killing work, to keep his hair and beard long and bushy to avoid identification. His fingertips had been burned smooth with acid in 1994 by the Americans who paid him to hunt down rogue UNITA units that they had trained and armed for the Angolan conflict.

It was late afternoon and getting dark before they were done. Corrie had been paid handsomely, the money would be transferred to his account in St Helier.

“What next?” asked Corrie, “Do I have to leave Ukraine now?”

The woman looked shocked, “Oh no Major, not unless you want to leave...” she hesitated and looked at Meisie, “Of course, we would prefer that you stay. Major Vesty will be contacting you in the next day or two ... he is eager to work with you. You will continue to be paid, at a higher rate according to your new rank. Please relax till Major Vesty can speak to you? He is coming from Odessa as quickly as he can.”

Corrie nodded, “I am happy to wait, but in the meantime, is there some way that you can provide me with travel papers for Meisie?” He asked, “I would feel better knowing that she could travel with me if I do need to leave Ukraine.”

“I will have to look into that, Sir. Marshal Bilyck may be able to help. She obtained the Guardianship papers for you and ... Maisie,” the woman seemed suddenly very uncomfortable. She stood and offered her hand to Corrie, saying she had to go.

Matty returned just before eight that evening. She looked very different out of uniform. She was surprised to find that Meisie had

washed and gone to bed. Corrie said he had no idea how long he would be around for, when Matty asked what his plans were. She explained that she had trained as a special needs teacher but had not done any actual teaching. She had volunteered to help with Ukrainian children traumatised by the war. She seemed a little unsettled by her lack of progress with Meisie, and told Corrie that she had read the report he had submitted about the incident when he found her.

“I am not a well educated man miss,” Corrie told her, “But I have spent more than thirty years dealing with violence and violent people, it affects different people differently, and the best thing you can do is wait patiently for them to ask for help.”

“How do you ...” Matty struggled to find the words, “Manage to deal with the ... I don’t know how to describe, but after you have killed someone or been in violence situations?”

“It depends,” said Corrie, “I don’t usually feel bad about killing people,” he smiled, “I know that sounds terrible, but it is what I do. The people I kill put themselves in harm’s way when they picked up a gun or put on a uniform. But I do get angry and upset sometimes. I see a lot of what is wrong and ugly in the world.” He lowered his voice, “Killing the men that were raping Meisie doesn’t trouble me, but I hurt inside for the harm they have done to her. It makes me want to lash out, to punish the Russian commanders who allow that sort of thing to happen, and men who think that they can take what they want from people they think are weaker than them. Sometimes I lose control and end up brawling; taking out my anger on strangers that annoy me, but mostly I deal with my demons by destroying them in fiction.” He held up the iPad he had been writing on, “This is my therapist.”

Matty gave him a troubled look and said she was tired, She told him that breakfast was served on the first floor from seven to nine AM and excused herself.

Corrie wrote till ten, then went to bed. He lay awake for a while thinking about what he had said to Matty and telling himself that it was mostly true.

He woke early to find Meisie watching him. She was already dressed in her combat uniform. He was surprised that he hadn't woken when she came into his room. It was raining hard, and still quite dark. They sat in the guest lounge, Corrie wanted to write, but felt uncomfortable with Meisie watching him. He asked if she played chess and suggested they play a game. He had never been any good at chess, and got thrashed by Meisie. They had a selection of board games, and several packs of cards. Corrie had never been interested in such things, but Meisie seemed content to play what looked like Solitaire with the cards. Corrie fetched out his iPad mini and got back into his story till Matty appeared and suggested they go through for breakfast. She was in uniform again, and suggested that they plan a schedule for the day. Meisie didn't look too pleased at having to do lessons. Corrie had no plans at all, and was happy to let Matty take charge. He would basically be free to do as he pleased till one PM, after which Matty would have the afternoon off while he and Meisie did as they pleased.

Corrie set off with a street map and found AppleKiev, and bought an iPad mini six with all the bells and whistles, then asked for directions to an outdoor gear shop and got a Rab olive green Goretex jacket for Meisie. He returned to AppleKiev and collected the iPad and accessories he had bought. The salesman showed him that the SIM card had been activated and how to add mobile data credit. It had stopped raining when he got back to the Grenade, he had coffee in the guest lounge and wrote on his iPad till it was time for lunch.

Meisie looked smug and Matty looked relieved and exhausted when they came down for lunch. Matty excused herself and said she would meet them for breakfast the next day.

The luncheon was a buffet. Meisie didn't put much food on her plate, and seemed to prefer vegetables to meat. Corrie was surprised that she didn't take any fries.

He asked her if she had enjoyed her morning, and she shrugged. He asked if she had enjoyed school before the war and she shrugged.

“I really enjoyed school,” said Corrie, “I love learning new things, and wish I could have gone to University. When I was at school I used to dream of being so rich that I could go to university and just keep on learning new things. If I survive this war, I think I am going to go to university.” He shrugged and concentrated on his food, aware of Meisie staring at him.

Meisie took her time eating her food, and seemed to enjoy it. Corrie waited till she was finished before handing her the shopping bag he had got from the outdoor gear shop.

“I got you a good waterproof, like mine. If it is too small we can exchange it today. Your iPad is just like mine too, but with more memory in case you like playing games. There are two AppleStore vouchers you can use to buy the things you want. You probably know more about how to use it than I do, but if not, the people at the shop can explain it to you...”

Meisie gave him a disbelieving look, and immediately tried on the Goretex jacket. It was a little too large, as Corrie had hoped. She looked really pleased with it. She took it off and folded it carefully before replacing it in the bag, then lifted out the iPad. She looked at Corrie, her expression unreadable and then gave him a hug, before sitting and unpacking the iPad. Corrie enjoyed watching her face when she was engrossed with the iPad. When it became clear that the staff wanted to clean the dining room, Corrie touched her arm and told her it was time for them to leave.

“I found a cinema,” said Corrie as they left the dining room, “Would you come with me to watch Fantastic Beasts tonight?”

They went for a short walk before returning to the hotel guest lounge where Meisie plugged in her apple ear buds and lost herself in the virtual world on her iPad. They missed the seven PM showing. Corrie laughed and suggested they go for a pizza instead. He didn't really like pizza's but thought it might appeal to Meisie. They ended up sharing a pizza, it wasn't as bad as Corrie had expected and he wasn't sure that Meisie liked it very much. They walked back to the Grenade and Meisie went off to her room almost immediately.

Matty asked Corrie to speak with her privately about Meisie before breakfast the next morning. She told him that she had decided she was not able to help Meisie and would be asking to be transferred.

“I cannot help her, she does not want my help and refuses to cooperate with me,” she said. Corrie sensed her anger and resentment.

“Thank you for trying,” he said to Matty, “I am sure that the patience and kindness that you have shown to Meisie will help her and that she will, in time, understand and be grateful for what you have done for her. I am so glad that there are people like you willing to help the children traumatised in this war. Be gentle with yourself too, it is a really difficult job you have chosen to do.”

Matty looked surprised and relieved, “Thank you Major, I am just sorry I could not do more. I should go now, let me just say goodbye to Maisie?”

Corrie waited outside their rooms till Matty left. She gave him a brief smile and a wave. Meisie followed her out of her room, and took Corrie’s hand as they set off for breakfast.

They spent the next two days roaming Kyiv. Corrie liked cafes, and parks and Kyiv has plenty of both. There was a message waiting for Corrie when he returned to the Grenade late on the day after Matty had left. He was invited to dinner with Major Vesty; a vehicle would be sent to collect him at 19:00.

Corrie asked Meisie if she would like to come too and she nodded reluctantly and went off to get ready.

Major Vesty

Major Vesty clearly hadn’t expected Meisie to come with Corrie, but he handled it well. The dinner was in a private room of a very old fashioned looking restaurant. A third chair was brought for Meisie, who, apart from not speaking, behaved well in Major Vesty’s presence.

“Please call me Sasha, may I call you Cornelius?” he had said when Corrie introduced himself, “It is a pleasure to meet you both.”

He was in a wheelchair, and had only a thumb and forefinger on his left hand. He looked to be in his forties, a dark haired, lean faced man who exuded energy.

They were given heavy leather bound menus by a balding waiter. Corrie didn't bother opening his.

“I was not expecting to eat this evening,” he said, “And I have eaten quite a lot during the day. Is it possible have a green salad?”

“You are a very interesting man, Cornelius,” said Sasha, “Marshal Bilyck has shared your file with me. I was a sniper myself.” He held up his left hand, “Though less successful than you, I was injured in the first week of Russia's occupation of Sevastopol in 2014, it was my first mission as a sniper, I had been ordered to kill Admiral Berezovsky, the Ukrainian Naval commander, after he changed his allegiance and joined the Russians.

“I remember you from the Olympic biathlon in Innsbruck in 2012,” said Corrie, “ Captain Alexander Vesty. Your shooting was impressive.”

“You were there?” asked Sasha looking surprised.

Corrie shook his head, “No, I have never competed at that level, but I enjoy watching the biathlon.”

“And you never forget a face,” said Sasha, “A useful skill for a sniper.”

“What went wrong in Sevastopol?” asked Corrie, “And how did you get out?”

The waiter took their order, and brought hot chocolate for Meisie, it smelled so good that Corrie wanted one. He had asked for sparkling water.

“I was betrayed,” said Sasha after the waiter had gone, “Half the Ukrainian military in Crimea defected to the Russians. It was a shameful time. But they failed to kill me and it was Marshal Bilyck, she was a major then, that got me out of Sevastopol,” said Sasha, “She is from Sevastopol, her father was a Russian industrialist, her mother, the daughter of the Tartar Khan of Crimea. When I failed to eliminate the traitor Berezovsky, it was Bilyck that organised the rescue mission that got me out of the secure military hospital, and brought me back to Kyiv. She speaks very highly of you.”

Sasha did most of the talking during the meal, telling Corrie about how the Ukrainians had slowly reorganised and built up their military after Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Blake had told Corrie most of it already, but Corrie realised it was just Sasha’s way of trying to make him comfortable. Corrie really was not hungry, but Meisie had a huge plate of dumplings, potatoes and meatballs, which she seemed determined to finish. Sasha timed his meal so that he finished his fish after Meisie eventually cleared her plate. Corrie decided then that he liked Sasha.

“I need to talk to Cornelius about some secret military things, Maisie,” said Sasha, “And I wonder if you would mind very much if we excused ourselves while you have your dessert? We will just be over there in the corner. I am told the knickerbocker glory ice cream here is the best in Kyiv.”

They waited till the ice cream arrived, a tall creation that looked enough for three people, before moving to a small table in the corner of the room. Sasha had asked for tea and Corrie had asked for a hot chocolate.

“Maisie is a lucky girl, Cornelius,” said Sasha when Corrie sat, “From what reports we have received, very few of the occupants of Komesk have survived.”

Corrie nodded, “It was not a very big village,” he said. “What is it that you want me to do?”

Sasha smiled, “It is best to be direct with you, yes?” He nodded and reached into his pocket for a brown envelope which he handed to Corrie, “This is a contract, signed by Marshal Bilyck and approved

by the minister of defence. Put simply we want you to eliminate as many of the Russian commanders as possible. If you agree, you will report directly to me. I will ensure that you are provided with intel reports and the support staff and equipment you need to carry out your assignments. Please read the contract and we can meet again tomorrow when you can decide.”

“I have already decided that this is going to be my last war, Sasha,” said Corrie opening the envelope. He scanned through the contents quickly, then looked up at Sasha.

“Send someone to the Grenade with a signed agreement saying that Meisie will receive all my earnings if I am killed or captured and I will sign this,” he said quietly, “Who will take care of her while I am away?”

“I will make sure it is done,” said Sasha, “And I will ask my sister to look after Maisie. Petra will come to the hotel tomorrow to meet you both. I am sure you will like her.”

“What have you got planned for me?” asked Corrie.

“You have heard about the Russian military column heading for Kyiv?” asked Sasha, “We want to make their lives miserable, and you will be a big help with that. Can you ride a motorbike?”

Petra and Sasha had breakfast with Corrie and Meisie at eight the following morning. Petra was lovely, Sasha’s twin, though she was plump and blonde. Her English was not fluent but perfectly adequate. She asked Corrie and Meisie to come to her home after breakfast, and decide if they preferred to stay there or at the Hotel. The house was closer to the city centre than the Grenade, and it was huge. An old building with wide passageways and deep cellars. Sasha lived there when he was in Kyiv, and they had a Schnauzer terrier, a Persian cat and an African Grey parrot. Meisie nodded vigorously when asked if she wanted to live there, and vanished with the dog moments later.

Eliminating top brass

That night Corrie set off with a cheerful young Ukrainian soldier. They were both riding electric motorbikes. Corrie had a tiny comms device, smaller than his cellphone. It contained images of all the Russian military insignias as well as the faces of at least twenty named individuals that were to be killed if and when possible. It was a one-way comms device, the technician who showed him how to use it, explained. It could only receive messages. Apparently the Russians had been able to track the transmissions from the two way comms devices. This one could also be remotely wiped or disabled, rendering it useless to the Russians if they got hold of it. Corrie wondered if that was how Anton, Blake and Podge had been killed; by the Russians zeroing in on the comms devices. The technician had also given him an emergency beacon, which he should only activate if he needed emergency extraction. She warned him that the Russians would be able to see it as well. It took two hours to get into position. They had left the motorbikes with a unit of forward observers. Now it was Corrie's job to get himself and his new spotter into place. The soldier was quiet enough, but just seemed too young to Corrie, he had given his name as Jack, and spoke good English. He was also incredibly fit, and seemed totally fresh when they finally crawled into position. It had taken two hours and Corrie's muscles were protesting. It took another hour to set up three remote firing units. Jack learned quickly and did the second and third in half the time that Corrie had taken to set up and demonstrate the first one.

They had a few hours till dawn, and after adding some finishing touches to their camouflage, Corrie went to sleep.

The vibrating of his comms device woke him. It was a little after nine AM. Jack looked like he hadn't slept a wink. Corrie studied the comms device for a while and handed it to Jack. There was a Russian patrol very close to their position. Four men. Corrie smiled when Jack handed back the comms device and readied his shotgun. Corrie felt his body relaxing.

"It's OK Jack," he spoke quietly, confident that the sound would not travel far or be heard against the background noise of gunfire, "They don't know that we are here. They would use mortars if they suspected it. With luck they will walk right past us." He could see

the sweat beading on Jack's upper lip and the pulse in the veins of his temple. Jack nodded and his lips moved in a silent prayer.

They heard the sound of shrubs brushing against legs as the patrol moved past. Corrie resisted a strong urge to fart and realised that he felt good. It felt like an age but was only fifteen minutes later when the comms device vibrated again; four words, "About to engage patrol."

There was a burst of automatic fire, an indistinct shout, followed by three short bursts of fire. A few seconds later the comms device vibrated again. The patrol had been eliminated.

It was noon when the comms device vibrated again, informing them that there was activity in the target zone. Corrie handed the comms device to Jack and waited for him to give it back and give him a thumbs up before getting himself into position.

He recognised two Russian commanders immediately. They seemed confident and were walking side by side. There were eight targets, but Corrie thought they would be lucky to get four. By the time Jack had identified the two major generals, Corrie had selected the four he would target first.

"Standby," he whispered and felt Jack tense up as he started recording.

Corrie managed six shots before there were no targets in site. He felt confident about five, but there was no time to check. Seconds later they activated the first remote firing unit as they backed out of the position and started moving back.

Four smoke canisters detonated just as a drone appeared. Corrie brought it down and it tumbled into the smoke.

"Run!" yelled Corrie just before Jack shot past him like a jackrabbit. Trying to run straight on rough ground in thick smoke while mortar shells are exploding around you is not fun. A row of vortexes appeared to Corrie's right showing the path of a machine gun firing blindly into the smoke. The sound followed half a second later. Jack

was down. Corrie dropped down next to him, worried that he had been hit. Jack was white-faced and shaking.

“Come on Jack, keep on moving,” said Corrie, “We are going to be fine. Just keep moving.” He took hold of Jack’s epaulette with his left hand, “Come on, breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. You can do it.”

A shell exploding behind them sprayed them with dirt. Jack rose shakily and they trotted forward.

When the smoke thinned Corrie pulled Jack down. They crawled into a shallow ditch and Corrie used his scope to check their surroundings.

“We can sit it out here for a while,” he told Jack, “Help me with the camouflage.”

Corrie offered Jack some peanuts, “At least it isn’t raining,” he said, “I think we have passed our RV. It happens.”

Jack didn’t talk for a while. He was looking better. Eventually he finished chewing and swallowed, “You have much experience, Major. I am sorry; I was frightened.”

“Call me Corrie Jack. It’s true, I have been doing this for a while, but I’m probably more scared than you. I think being scared has helped to keep me alive. Do you think you can find our RV? I really don’t want to walk all the way back to Kyiv.”

It took Jack two hours to get them back to the RV. The woman waiting for them didn’t speak English, she led them to an underground shelter behind a burned out farm building. They were greeted warmly by a man Corrie recognised from the forward observer unit. He congratulated Corrie and downloaded the recording of the kill. All six of Corrie’s shots had hit. They were given a meaty stew and some bread and slept till eight PM, when Jack led Corrie back to Kyiv.

Targeting the drone menace

Two nights later Jack, whose real name was Jercy, apparently, led Corrie out on another mission. This time the target was a drone control unit. A vehicle parked inside a barn. The closest they could get was at the extreme range of Corrie's ability, one thousand and twenty metres. There were three armoured vehicles dug in around the building, and the volunteer who had led Jack and Corrie told Jack that she had counted at least thirty troopers while observing the position.

"Taking out the drone operators is going to be tough at this distance," Corrie told Jack, "And getting out of here alive is going to be even harder. We have a lot of preparation to do."

The volunteer insisted on staying with them. A tiny slip of a woman, she worked tirelessly helping to position and set the smoke and remote firing units. Corrie decided that their best hope for success and getting away was to take out as many of the enemy as possible and hope that their artillery would help to finish the job. Jack was an infantry marksman, making him fairly proficient with a rifle, but Lisle, the volunteer had never handled a rifle, though Jack said she had been given some lessons with the 9mm semiautomatic pistol that she carried. Corrie fired the first shot at dawn, taking down a hapless soldier relieving himself next to a farm trailer. The next round, a tracer, placed into a fuel bowser disabled an adjacent armoured car. One armoured car managed to get out of the hole it was in before Corrie managed to disable it by destroying a track link. He counted nineteen troopers down before the drone unit crashed out of the barn. Corrie waited till it was in an open area before sending a round into the truck's engine. Picking off the six crew after that was sickeningly easy, but the remaining troopers were zoning in on Corrie by the time he had finished.

It took nearly half an hour, moving back and making use of the smoke and remote fire units, before Corrie felt it was safe to make a run for it. The ground shook as Russian artillery pounded the land around the barn, effectively protecting them from the remaining troops. Jack whooped with relief as they all tumbled into their RV. They were all breathless and shaking. Corrie shared the last of his peanuts and cheese with Jack and Lisle.

Jack woke Corrie just before dawn. A message had arrived from command instructing them to move to alternative RV number three for another mission.

Shooting ducks in a barrel

Lisle guided them. Three hours later Corrie was on his belly looking down at a long line of Russian vehicles from a low ridge. Two vehicles at the front of the column were burning fiercely, and every now and again there was an explosion as ammunition exploded. There was a lot of smoke being set off by the Russians as Ukrainian infantry fired at them from the slopes on either side of the road. It was a duck shoot.

Corrie took his time. The Barrett was ideal for this kind of work. He slowed his rate of fire, not wanting to damage the barrel, as he had no spare. He and Jack changed position eight times and fired off a hundred rounds before Corrie decided they had done enough. He had one magazine of ten rounds left when they started moving back. Corrie put two more rounds into a Russian warplane before they reached their RV.

The command post had moved again. An older soldier guided them. He seemed cheerful despite the blood seeping through a bandage around his upper arm.

Their electric motorbikes had been commandeered for another mission. The commander told Corrie that he would ask for two more barrels and another box of ammunition for the Barrett, but didn't sound very hopeful. He offered them beer and congratulated Corrie on the work he had done after reviewing the video. Corrie turned down the beer but enjoyed a stew of potatoes, sausage and beans. He crawled under a table and fell asleep. When he woke there was a cat sleeping on top of him.

Jack managed to get hold of a 7.62 sniper rifle. He said it was Finnish. The stock was a little short for Corrie, but he liked the feel of the weapon. Jack offered to modify the Barrett scope mount, but Corrie declined. The optical scope was pretty good, and he didn't want to risk damage to the Barrett. He was less than convinced when the commander said they would take good care of the Barrett

when Jack and Corrie set off for the next mission. A big shot had been helicoptered in to invigorate the beleaguered Russian troops on the road. Command wanted Corrie to kill him. They weren't sure who he was, but the security surrounding him indicated a top commander. Jack and Corrie were guided by a very quietly spoken soldier with prematurely grey hair and pale blue eyes. They crawled on their bellies for four hours. Corrie recognised the big shot immediately, number three of the Russian military command in Ukraine. He put two bullets into the man's chest and one into his head, then fired two more rounds at his aides before being practically dragged backwards by Jack. Seconds later their fire position was hit by a shell. Corrie was buried under what felt like a ton of soil. Jack and the blue-eyed soldier dug him out with their hands. They ran a gauntlet of tank and mortar fire for a good twenty minutes. The blue-eyed soldier was bleeding from a painful looking wound on the back of his head and Jack was limping after being blown off his feet and landing awkwardly. They were guided into a trench by grinning soldiers. Corrie's Finnish sniper rifle was damaged; the barrel was bent and the scope had been knocked off and lost.

Jack and Corrie were sent back to Kyiv. Jack's knee was the size of a football. Corrie felt lost without his Barrett.

Meisie wanted to come into the bathroom with Corrie. When he saw himself in the bathroom mirror he was surprised that Petra had let him into the house, never mind hug him and kiss his filthy bearded cheeks.

He woke in the middle of the night, and decided to fetch his iPad. He switched on the light and was surprised to find Meisie curled up on the armchair in his room, fast asleep. She looked uncomfortable, so he picked her up and put her in his bed, then fetched his iPad and sat in the armchair writing.

Sasha arrived while they were having lunch. He was with a man Corrie recognised but couldn't place for a while.

"Major Prinsloo, may I introduce you to the Mayor of Kyiv, Vitali Klitschko?" said Sasha with a wide grin.

The big man grinned and shook Corrie's hand as Corrie made the connection.

"It is an honour to meet you, Sir," said Corrie, "You are even bigger than I imagined."

"Please call me Vitali, Major," said the Mayor, "And who is this fierce warrior?" he asked extending his hand to Meisie, who went bright red and extended her hand to him. Vitali shook it and thanked her politely, before turning to greet Petra, who he already knew.

They sat at the table, but declined food. There were four burly bodyguards with the Mayor. He thanked Corrie for his work and asked him if he needed anything. Corrie laughed and said he would like his Barrett and two new barrels, but otherwise, he had more than he deserved or needed.

"We have your Barrett and there are new barrels in the city, along with more ammunition," Sasha assured Corrie, "It is a formidable weapon in experienced hands, "We have asked the Americans for more of them."

Sasha remained behind when the mayor left with his bodyguards. Petra asked Meisie to go with her and leave Corrie and Sasha to talk. Meisie went without a murmur and even smiled as she wiggled her fingers at Corrie.

"Your sister is good with Meisie," said Corrie.

"They are as thick as thieves," said Sasha, "And always playing violent games on that iPad. I never knew my sister was so bloodthirsty." He looked at Corrie, "You are getting quite a reputation. Your action against the drone unit is becoming popular viewing amongst the military."

Corrie shrugged, "I don't enjoy watching people being killed," he said, "It was necessary, there were too many troops there, they would have caught up with us if we only targeted the drone team."

“You are a professional, but for Ukrainians, this is a very personal war. It is normal, I think, for us to feel good about seeing the enemy being destroyed.” Sasha smiled sadly, “I certainly understand it.”

Corrie nodded but said nothing.

The high price of promotion

Sasha nodded and moved his wheelchair back a bit so that he could use his hands to reposition a leg, “If I survive this war, I am going to get rid of these legs,” he said, “They are a constant reminder...” He laughed, “Don’t listen to me, I am just tired.” He moved back to the table, “And I suppose I should call you Sir now. You have been promoted again. Lieutenant Colonel. It’s official – Vitali was supposed to tell you himself, but I told him that you aren’t interested in rank... Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Every time you people promote me, you ask me to do something difficult,” said Corrie, “Where are you sending me next?”

Sasha looked down, unable to hold Corrie’s eyes. He fingered the place setting mat in front of him, “You are quite right,” he said quietly, “And I would not argue if you refuse the mission.” He looked up and into Corrie’s eyes, “We want you to go into the Luhansk Oblast. It is under Russian control and there are many Russian sympathisers there. We believe that the Russians will withdraw from Kyiv and concentrate on Eastern Ukraine, we want you to make them suffer.”

“It sounds like fun,” said Corrie, “I take it that this is not a quick in and out job?”

Sasha shook his head, “No, but you will not be asked to do anything else after this. I estimate that the best you can do is four weeks, after that you need to get out and we will fly you wherever you want to go.”

“I don’t speak Russian or Ukrainian,” said Corrie, “What backup are you providing?”

Sasha visibly relaxed, “That is the easy part, we have an agent in the city. Her father-in-law is a South African, but he is here in Kyiv, in a mental hospital. She and her husband were city engineers, she stopped work after they married and started again last year, after her husband died.”

Corrie nodded slowly, “And when do you want me there?” he asked.

Sasha shrugged, “It will take a week at least to get everything ready, we will send your equipment separately. I am also looking for one more person to send into the region before you go there.”

Corrie nodded, “Alright. I will do it,” he said, “Meisie seems happy with your sister, and I don’t have anything else to do.”

Two days later Corrie got a Ukrainian passport in the name of Cornelius Prins, and one for his daughter, Maisie Prins, aged twelve and born in Kyiv. Corrie’s birthday was correct and it showed that he was born in Ndola, Zambia, to Ukrainian parents, instead of Kimberly, South Africa of German and South African parents.

The week passed too quickly. Corrie, Meisie and Petra spent most of the days exploring Kyiv. Petra was a lot of fun, and knew all the best places. When they weren’t swimming, walking or watching a movie, Petra and Meisie played a lot of computer games, mostly war orientated. Meisie laughed a lot, but still did not speak.

Corrie guessed that Sasha or Petra had told Meisie that he was going away, as she accepted it calmly when he told her the night before he was due to go. Sasha came with Corrie to the railway station. A woman, dressed as a nurse came with them, and two men in workman’s clothing. The station was crowded with civilians, but the train seemed to be carrying more military than civilians. They had a carriage more or less to themselves.

Corrie soon learned to relax on the train. His “nurse” was military and spoke reasonable English, though she seemed preoccupied with her own thoughts and reluctant to talk. The two men didn’t speak English very well, and played cards and chatted quietly with each other for most of the journey.

They changed train five times, but the trains were not being targeted by the Russians which Corrie thought was strange, as they were definitely carrying supplies and personnel for the Ukrainian Military. Aircraft were clearly overflying the train routes, and Corrie assumed they were Ukrainian Air Force. It was a relief when they finally disembarked in Luhansk. The two men that had been travelling with them shook Corrie's hand and left him with his Nurse who told him simply that they should wait. Corrie's bum had gone numb by the time his "daughter-in-Law" arrived to collect him. He played the role he had been told to play, embracing her awkwardly and leaning heavily on the walking stick he had been provided with, leaving the two women to struggle with the luggage. Corrie stoically stared into space while his papers were checked at length and then shuffled off and climbed into the passenger seat of an old Volvo estate car with a cracked windscreen. Astrid, his "daughter-in-Law" was a business-like, stout woman with a strong Slavic face. She spoke surprisingly good Afrikaans and excellent English. She took them to a detached house bordering what looked like an industrial complex.

The nurse left about an hour after they got to Astrid's house. She and Astrid had spent most of that time talking in what turned out to be Russian. Astrid explained afterwards that she was a Russian speaker and didn't speak Ukrainian very well.

Astrid took Corrie down to the basement and showed him the equipment there. He was pleased to see his Barrett with two spare barrels and enough ammunition to wipe out a battalion. There were two silenced Nagant rifles and ammunition for them as well. Corrie was familiar with the weapons but not enthusiastic about them. Corrie spent an hour going through the equipment before going back upstairs. Astrid had prepared food and asked him what he liked to drink.

"Coffee and water mostly," said Corrie, "Rum when I want to get blind drunk and very occasionally a cold beer. Never tea."

"My father in law liked Rooibos," said Astrid, "And I still have some, if you would like it?"

Corrie smiled, "You are the first European I have heard pronounce it properly, and your Afrikaans is very good too."

"Pa always spoke Afrikaans with my husband," said Astrid, "He was an interesting man, but now he doesn't even recognise himself in the mirror. Too many cigarettes and beer."

They spoke about life in general for a while before getting to what Corrie was doing in Luhansk.

"You are putting yourself at a lot of risk," said Corrie when Astrid told him that she had already identified a target for him.

Astrid shrugged, "My husband is dead, my brothers are dead, my only living relative is my father-in-law whose mind is dead. Before 2014 I was a happy person, I loved being Ukrainian and visiting Russia. My mother was born in St Petersburg, her parents were French and Ukrainian. Since 2014 I have begun to hate the Russian state, and the way they are creating hatred between Russian and Ukrainian speakers in Ukraine."

Corrie nodded, "I am sorry, it is none of my business, but I think I understand. Tell me about the target you have identified?"

Dealing out death and destruction

Astrid produced one of the cell phone sized communication devices and scrolled through some images till she found the one she was looking for, "Dimitry Odensky, FSB colonel," she said, "He is in Luhansk and directing operations against civilians in the region. Killing him makes it safer for people like me."

She spent three hours going over the plan with Corrie. He liked the way her mind worked, she was methodical and thorough. She had identified several escape routes. It was, she suggested, a job to be done with a silenced Nagant rifle. Corrie agreed, but wanted to test fire the weapon.

Astrid led him deep into the tunnels, which she said went all the way under the steelworks. Corrie used twenty rounds to zero the weapon. He was ready.

The next morning Corrie set off with Astrid in her Volvo. The rifle, ammunition and equipment were in a false compartment under his wheelchair in the back of the vehicle. Astrid parked in a basement car park not far from the railway station, and led Corrie into the tunnels. It took a little over an hour to reach the designated RV. They changed into coveralls and stashed everything they weren't taking to the kill site behind some pipe work. The rifle and ammunition were put into a section of pipe that Corrie carried with an improvised sling. Astrid said they were unlikely to meet any workers in that section but it was safer not to assume.

Getting up into position once they left the tunnels took longer, but Astrid had been right about the location, Corrie could see right into the offices from the roof of the building she led him to. They had to wait for several hours before the lights came on in the building, it was seven PM. Astrid saw the target first and crawled along the parapet to fetch Corrie. Odensky was at a desk, side on to the window, the distance was less than a hundred metres. Corrie sent Astrid away to cover their escape route. She had a silenced pistol. Five minutes later Corrie put two bullets into Odensky before following Astrid. Half an hour later they were changing back into their clothes. They hid the rifle and ammunition and made it back to the vehicle without incident. Corrie sensed Astrid's relief when they got back into traffic.

The next morning Astrid went to work and returned mid day with two more targets for Corrie. They studied maps of the city before deciding on the target close to where they had killed Odensky. It was a Russian speaking Ukrainian – a low level commander of a pro-Russian militia. Using the same rifle, Corrie shot him dead as he left the night school where he was studying accounting. They abandoned the rifle in a drain and changed into street clothes behind an oil storage tank. The streets had become much busier than they had been.

"It's OK," said Astrid quietly, "It is just people coming out of the bars and clubs I think." She kept a hand on his elbow as he walked slowly, leaning on his stick. Police vehicles passed them, their sirens blaring but nobody paid them any attention.

At noon the next day Corrie used the Barrett to kill a Russian Military Intelligence colonel as he sat down at his favourite café close to the telephone exchange. Half an hour later Corrie and Astrid were on the other side of the city walking in a park and feeding swans while Corrie's Barrett was being carried away through the tunnels.

The next day there were a lot of roadblocks, vehicles were being searched and Astrid told Corrie that several people had been arrested by the authorities. They had planned three more long distance shots near the city centre, but decided to concentrate on targets outside of the city instead. Astrid had identified a yard where several multiple rocket launch vehicles and containers of rockets were stored on the outskirts of the city. It took a day to plan the operation. The yard was surrounded by a four meter brick wall and finding a suitable firing position was difficult. The only location that they could get to was five hundred metres from the target area and Corrie would have a long exposed climb to reach it. He could fast rope down the side of the building to exit the area but he would still be exposed. They decided that the best time to strike was at the peak of the morning rush hour, which would hamper the follow up. Corrie would get into position during the night.

Astrid told Corrie that Meisie had gone missing just before they set off for the mission. She had received the message and said that Petra thought that Meisie might have gone looking for Corrie.

Corrie did not enjoy the long slow climb up the outside of the silo he had to climb. His arm and leg muscles were trembling when he finally reached the top and lay exhausted behind the parapet. His misery was compounded by rain during the night. There was very little shelter on the top of the silo, and Corrie felt very exposed when the sun came up. He heard a helicopter and hoped he was well enough hidden under the two horizontal thirty centimetre diameter pipes that crossed the roof. He moved into position at 07:45, it took him less than five minutes to plan his shots and at 08:00 he was on the ground and running, his face and beard hidden by a grey balaclava. By 08:10 he and Astrid were in the tunnels.

The next day they were checking out a building two hours North of the City that was being used to store ammunition for the Russians.

There were no suitable vantage points and Corrie said he didn't think he could do much more than shoot a few guards. He suggested they find a way to detonate a bomb inside the building, which appealed to Astrid. They were stopped by police when they returned to the city, but after a cursory check of their papers they were allowed to proceed.

That night Corrie killed two senior Russian military men when they emerged from the home of the deputy mayor. He used a silenced Nagant rifle and was back in Astrid's house within an hour of firing the first shot.

That same night, at around the time Corrie shot the officers, the ammunition warehouse North of the city blew up. Astrid was stopped and searched three times the next day.

From the frying pan into the fire

Corrie was having trouble sleeping. He realised that he was worried about Meisie and it didn't help to tell himself that there was nothing he could do about it. The following morning Astrid told him that they had to leave, the woman that had accompanied Corrie to Luhansk had been arrested by the authorities. They drove west out of the city in a Citroen van, Astrid told him that the Barrett and equipment would be brought to them later. A policewoman stopped them on the outskirts of the city, then squeezed in between Corrie and Astrid. She laughed as she squeezed Corrie's thigh.

"I am Elina, it is time to get out of Luhansk for me too." She said.

Elina shared the driving with Astrid, the Citroen was hers, and she drove them to her parents home in Horlivka. Her parents had left for Poland. It soon became clear to Corrie that Astrid and Elina were very close. They spent three tense days waiting in Horlivka before Elina was contacted. An hour later they were driving to Avdiivka, just North of Donetsk Airport. Corrie recognised the two men who had travelled to Luhansk with him. They greeted him with wide smiles and obvious relief. They had brought his Barrett and equipment. They also had new communications equipment. Satellite phones which were supposedly safe from Russian detectors. Astrid was not

convinced and said that they would not use the phones in the safe house, which was next to a popular bar on the Donetsk road.

Elina drove them to a warehouse near a massive Coke Plant, where they met with a Ukrainian army intelligence Captain. He told them that a team of Russian military planners from Syria were expected to arrive at the airport and that the Ukrainian High Command wanted four of them eliminated. There was also an Iranian that they wanted dead amongst the Syrian fighters arriving with the Russians. The captain said that he had asked for another sniper to assist, but had not yet had a response to the request. The plane had not yet left Damascus, but he said they would be informed as soon as it took off from there.

Corrie recognised the Iranian, he had worked with Hezbollah and was wanted by the Americans as well as the Israelis. The Russians all seemed very young to him.

Elina drove Corrie to reconnoiter the airport. It was heavily guarded.

The intelligence officer gave them high resolution satellite images of the airport and its surroundings. He suggested that they operate from a quarry close to the town of Spartak, close to the airport.

Corrie managed to speak to Sasha on the satellite phone. Sasha told him that Meisie had still not been found. She had taken her papers and passport with her.

“I am sorry Corrie, I promise that I will keep looking for her. I am hoping she headed for Lviv, as many displaced Ukrainians are doing. Petra is very distressed and blames herself. Maisie seemed to be happy with us. I don’t understand it,” said Sasha.

“How goes the war?” asked Corrie, to change the subject.

“The Russians are pulling back from Kyiv,” said Sasha, “But they are leaving a terrible trail of destruction behind them. It looks like they are going to concentrate their forces on Eastern Ukraine now, although they are still bombing Kyiv and even Lviv in the far west. You have done well. Thank you.”

A sniper arrived, another foreign volunteer. Corrie recognised the young American who had been with the British ex-paratrooper pestering Meisie when they arrived at the Ukrainian Foreign Legion NCO's mess in Kyiv.

“How you doing grandad?” the American greeted Corrie when he and Elina arrived, “Looks like you're going for slightly older women than the last time we met.”

“Fuck off,” responded Corrie calmly.

“Is there a problem between you two?” asked Elina.

Corrie shook his head, “Not really, I just don't like him, but don't worry about it.”

The American laughed, “We aren't here to be friends, honey, we just want to kick some Russian ass. I'm Andrew Jackson – master sergeant.”

They studied the satellite images some more and ate cold meat and fresh bread. One of the Ukrainians made coffee. Corrie had just made himself comfortable when Astrid found him and told him they had to leave. The plane would be arriving in six hours time.

Corrie went with Astrid and one of the Ukrainians, Peter. Elina and the intelligence officer went with Jackson. It was two in the morning when they approached the quarry. Corrie backed slowly away and told Astrid there was an anti-aircraft squadron in the quarry. They met up with the others and after a short discussion, they set off across the fields towards the runway. Jackson was in the front. After half an hour they stopped. There was a minefield between them and the runway. It took an hour, crawling on all fours and probing the soil with his knife for mines before Corrie got them out of the minefield. Jackson suggested they move to the opposite side of the airport, and set up an ambush to take out the targets as they were being driven towards the town. Corrie liked the idea. Two hours later they were in place. Corrie thought they had a good chance of taking down the targets, but he was less optimistic on their chances of extracting themselves without taking casualties. The intelligence

officer and the Ukrainian man took up forward positions. Corrie and Jackson were spaced roughly eighty metres apart, they had agreed to maintain radio silence till the targets had been confirmed by the intelligence officer. Corrie decided that he needed a piss just as the plane came in to land. He was back in position and ready long before the Intelligence officer spoke. Three of the Russians were in the second vehicle. The Iranian was in the fourth vehicle. Jackson targeted the Russians, starting with the one in the front passenger seat, Corrie would start with the Iranian in the fourth vehicle, and then target the Russians in the back passenger seat of the second vehicle.

It was over in seconds, Corrie felt Astrid tugging on his arm and urging him to run. A helicopter approached as they reached the vehicles. Corrie fired two rounds into the helicopter before being pulled back by Astrid. The helicopter ploughed into the ground sending a section of rotor blade through the air above their heads making a whooping sound. They left the stolen vehicles and weapons in the hospital car park. Jackson and Peter took a bus from the hospital. Astrid, Elina and Corrie walked two blocks to where Elina had left her Citroen van.

The intelligence officer contacted them just after they reached Elina's house, twenty minutes later they were moving again. They swapped Elina's Citroen van for a new looking BMW SUV that smelled strongly of stale cigarette smoke. Elina told them they were heading for the best hotel in Donetsk.

Jackson was waiting for them in the hotel's underground car park. They transferred to a large old fashioned Mercedes Benz and drove out of the city heading east.

Elina was driving with the satellite phone pressed to her ear talking in Ukrainian when the car seemed to jump into the air. Corrie just had time to register that the Russians must have been tracking the satellite phone when everything went black.

Paying the price

It took Corrie a while to realise where he was. A hospital. His chest hurt, he had a stinking headache and a horrible ringing sound in his ears. It was dark.

“Fuck it,” thought Corrie, “They’ve got me now.” He carefully tried to assess his injuries. He could hardly raise his head, and moving his arms made his chest hurt even more. His legs felt OK, if a bit numb. He managed to turn his head from side to side. He was in a ward with other people, mostly elderly. There were no bars on the windows. He managed to raise his hands, bending his arms at the elbows, which didn’t hurt his chest so much. He wasn’t shackled or restrained. He concentrated on his breathing, getting it under control, and centring himself. He drifted off back to sleep.

It was light when he woke again. A hand shaking his shoulder gently and a voice speaking. He did not understand a word and decided to play dumb. He opened his eyes and stared blankly at the woman who smiled at him and asked him a question in Ukrainian or Russian. He tried to sit up and her expression changed to one of concern. She pressed down on his shoulder speaking slowly and firmly. Corrie got the impression that she didn’t want him to sit up. That was fine by him, trying had hurt a lot. He lay back and closed his eyes. More shaking on his shoulder. He opened his eyes. A man this time. He peered into Corrie’s eyes and spoke, repeating himself slowly. Corrie just stared at him blankly. It made him think of Meisie. He hoped that she was OK.

The woman returned and raised the head of Corrie’s bed so that he was half sat up. It hurt a bit at first. She had a bowl of what turned out to be porridge and fed him carefully. It wasn’t bad. He was given water to drink and then left alone for a while. He closed his eyes but didn’t sleep.

A hand on his shoulder. He opened his eyes, another woman. Older, almost his age. She spoke to him but he gave no response. She looked into his eyes, then pulled back the covers and unbuttoned his top. She touched his chest, causing him to wince and close his eyes. She wasn’t rough, but it hurt. She listened to his chest with a stethoscope and made notes on a clipboard. The younger woman buttoned up his top and pulled the covers back,

lifting Corrie's arms. He saw a long row of stitches on his left forearm. He couldn't feel them.

He watched the older woman as she worked her way around the room. The floor he was on seemed to be at least one story above ground judging by the tops of the trees he could see. Another woman did the rounds of the patients in the ward, taking her time with each one, brushing teeth and cleaning faces, hands and cutting fingernails. There were fifteen beds in the ward, and only two empty ones. The occupants were all male and most looked as old or older than Corrie. The woman unwrapped a new toothbrush for Corrie and spoke to him, though he didn't know what she was saying and didn't respond. She clenched her teeth and pulled back her lips as she mimed cleaning her teeth. She was very patient and gentle. She even brushed his beard and hair for him. Whatever she was saying sounded nice. Corrie needed a toilet some time later, and managed to get himself properly sat up, but the pain was too much and he passed out. It was dark when he woke again. He felt uncomfortable and realised that he had a catheter in his penis and was strapped down on the bed. He was also wearing a nappy and he must have crapped in it. Corrie lay awake for hours his mind refusing to focus and jumping around like a monkey on speed.

The days followed a very similar routine. Some of the patients had visitors in the afternoon for about an hour. Not very many. Corrie got a few curious glances from some of the visitors. He hated that he had to have his nappy changed and his shitty arse cleaned by a stranger, but the nurses or carers were very good to him. The only man he saw after the first day was a cleaner, who seemed to be a simpleton, who avoided eye contact as he swept and mopped the floors after lunch before the visitors arrived. The skin on Corrie's chest and left arm began to itch so much that Corrie tried to scratch his chest, and felt that it was crisscrossed with stitches. The woman who came to brush his teeth after breakfast fetched the woman that seemed to be in charge, and who Corrie thought was a doctor. She checked his arm and chest carefully, before injecting him with something. That night Corrie carefully examined his chest with his right hand. He had a large X of stitches across his chest and decided that he must have had some sort of heart or lung surgery. The itching had lessened and was gone the next day, but the doctor injected him for five more days, by which time he was able to sit up

without much pain. A priest came wearing his robes, Corrie realised it must be a Sunday, making it eight days since the car was blown apart. Or fifteen. The next day, two men came to question Corrie. The doctor protested, but was politely made to move away. The men were not wearing uniform. They spoke to Corrie in several languages, he recognised the German, Spanish and French as well as the English, but didn't respond to any. They took his fingerprints and photographed him and finally left after handcuffing his left wrist to the bed frame

Corrie wondered what they knew, and wished he knew what had happened to Jackson, Astrid and Elina.

Bittersweet reunion

Corrie hadn't slept much during the night, and was asleep after lunch when the visitors arrived. He was startled awake when somebody wrapped their arms around his neck and whispered in his ear.

"Do not speak, they don't know who you are, pretend you are retarded."

It was Meisie. Corrie stared at her. She was smiling but had tears in her eyes. She took hold of his right hand and spoke in what sounded like Ukrainian or Russian. Her voice was deeper than he had expected. The doctor and one of the nurses was stood behind her. They looked as surprised as Corrie felt. One of the men came and stood watching carefully while Meisie spoke. He heard the words Cornelius Prins but did not understand what Meisie was saying. The man asked several questions, which Meisie answered. He looked at Corrie suspiciously before leaving. Meisie gave Corrie a hug and kissed his cheek before leaving with the doctor. The nurse smiled sadly and patted Corrie's hand.

Meisie returned the following day. She looked directly at Corrie and mouthed "Do not speak," then took his hand and kissed his cheek. He could tell that she was upset and wanted to cry, but she chatted to him using words he didn't understand. When she left, at the end of visiting time, Corrie turned his head to watch her go and saw, briefly, while the door to the ward was open, the same two men who

had come in and questioned him earlier. One of them took Meisie's arm. It was not a friendly gesture. Corrie felt his pulse racing.

His catheter was removed the next morning, and the doctor and the nurse had an animated discussion regarding the handcuff securing Corrie's left wrist to the bed frame. The nurse and a younger woman spent some time with Corrie before lunch, getting him to sit up and do simple exercises with his free arm and legs. His chest hurt but it was not unbearable pain.

That afternoon, when visitors were allowed in, Meisie ran to Corrie's bed. He recognised a greeting and the word Dido, but kept silent and unresponsive when Meisie kissed him and took his hand. The nurse came in with one of the men and was clearly asking him to remove Corrie's handcuff. The man studied Corrie carefully before removing the handcuff. He then moved back, and stood in the corner of the room closest to Corrie. The nurse said something to Meisie who nodded and smiled, before the nurse moved around to the right hand side of the bed and gently pulled the covers back. She spoke to Corrie and used her fingers to indicate that she wanted him to walk. Meisie took Corrie's right arm and the nurse his left. He didn't have much trouble walking though his balance seemed a bit off. He walked up and down the ward in between the beds twice before they let him walk by himself. Corrie steadied himself on the bed ends, deciding that it would probably be a good idea to appear more feeble than he really was. The nurse urged him to keep going towards the door. The other man was sitting on a bench just outside the door. He watched warily as Corrie was led out of the ward. He put a hand on Meisie's shoulder, pretending to need the extra support as he was guided towards another door, which opened to a large toilet with rails and supports for disabled people. Corrie was grateful when Meisie remained outside. The nurse came in with him and removed the nappy, talking calmly as she did so. Corrie had got used to her cleaning him and felt less embarrassed than he would have as the woman indicated that he should use the loo. She tapped her wrist and held up five fingers, then left the room. Corrie had just lowered himself onto the toilet when the door was pushed open by the man who had been sitting in the corridor. He looked at Corrie then crossed the room and looked at the window, which was barred, before turning and walking out. Corrie heard the nurse remonstrating with him. Corrie was

finished on the toilet and staring at himself in the mirror above the basin when the nurse came back into the room. She muttered something with a smile as she buttoned Corrie's top, then indicated that he should wash his hands, which he did again. She took his arm and led him back to his bed, then grimaced apologetically as she held up the open end of the handcuff and gently closed it around Corrie's wrist. Visiting hour was not over but Meisie was gone, as were the two men.

The next morning, a man in uniform came and unlocked Corrie's handcuff so that he could get up and exercise. He remained with them when Corrie was allowed to make his way slowly down one flight of stairs, with the nurse and young physiotherapist taking care that he did not fall. He was taken to a room equipped like a gym. The nurse left but the man remained, sitting at the door while Corrie was given exercises to do. He enjoyed and appreciated the exercises, even when they hurt, and struggled to walk back up the stairs. He was allowed to use the toilet twice a day, and was accompanied by what he assumed was a security guard whenever he was un-cuffed and out of bed.

Meisie did not return for three days. Corrie was feeling much stronger but worried about what had happened to her. When she did return she rushed across the ward to his bed and flung her arms around his neck. She looked as if she had been crying, but she smiled brightly as she took his hand and chattered away at him unintelligibly. Corrie felt her pressing something into the space between his index and middle finger. A tiny ball of something hard. The men did not come into the ward, but Corrie saw one take Meisie's arm when she left.

He waited till he was taken to the toilet before examining the ball that Meisie had secreted in his hand. It was a note and he had to squint and hold it at arms length to read the tiny writing.

"The secret police are waiting to take you for questioning. I have told them that you are my grandfather Kornelius Prinz and that you are very confused and only speak africanz. You do not even know your name or mine but that you are used to me. We got separated when your daughters house was bombed."

Corrie tore the paper into tiny pieces and flushed it down the toilet, making sure it was all gone before washing his hands and heading back to his bed.

Meisie visited every third day for the next two weeks. She put two more notes into his hand. The first was to tell him that one of Sasha's people knew where he was. The second was to tell him that he was going to be taken from the hospital the next day.

Interrogation

Corrie was allowed to dress himself in a clean tracksuit and crocs. The woman who cleaned his teeth after breakfast, the nurse and the physiotherapist all hugged him and looked tearful. The doctor was waiting outside the ward with the two men. She looked angry and squeezed Corrie's arm sympathetically before turning and walking away. One of the men took Corrie's arm and indicated the stairs, speaking in English, "Come on old man, it's time to learn some truth about you."

Corrie was led outside and across an almost empty car park to a black Mercedes. He sat in the back, his left arm hand cuffed to a hand hold above the door that looked tatty from such use.

It was a short drive, less than fifteen minutes. Corrie braced himself for what was to come.

It was not as bad as he had feared. He had been subjected to far worse during his time in the army. He was left in a bare windowless room with two metal chairs and a painted metal table for hours. He sat patiently for a while and then curled up on his side in the corner and tried to sleep.

He woke when the door was unlocked and opened. He had expected one of the men but it was a woman. She spoke to him in Afrikaans.

"Good morning, how are you?" She asked.

Corrie sat up and made a show of struggling to get to his feet as he answered carefully, "Thank you, I am good."

“What is your name?” asked the woman. Corrie realised that she was not a native Afrikaans speaker.

He kept his face blank as he stared at her, “I think... I think,” He shook his head and sighed, “I don’t know.”

“How old are you?”

Corrie shook his head, “I don’t know.”

The woman asked him question after question and moved closer to Corrie, he backed away as her questioning got more aggressive till he was backed into the corner. The woman pressed a finger against his chest and he winced, though it had not hurt much.

The woman turned her back to him and after a couple of seconds she walked out of the room, closing the door behind her. Corrie was getting desperate to pee, but he remained where he was, squatting down with his back pressed into the corner, facing the door, which he was certain they had not locked, deliberately.

A man Corrie had not seen before came for Corrie, beckoning from the door. He had a gun on his hip and a baton in his hand. He indicated that Corrie walk ahead of him and prodded him quite gently to make him move. There was an open door three doors along. The man pressed the baton against Corrie’s shoulder, nudging him left towards the door. It was a cell, painted with the same grey paint. There was no window but there was a toilet and a basin as well as a metal bunk. The door was closed and locked behind Corrie as he hurried towards the toilet. There was no toilet paper and no soap in the basin, but there was water.

Corrie sat on the bunk and eventually lay on it till he fell asleep. He had no idea how long he was left there. The light remained on and he used the toilet twice. He drank the metallic tasting water from the basin. And lay on his bunk.

Corrie was asleep when the door was unlocked and opened. The Afrikaans speaking woman was there with the man with the gun and baton. She asked him to come out of the room and he followed

her back to the room he had been questioned in. The woman asked him to sit and he did. She sat opposite him and opened a folder, which she turned around and placed in front of him.

“Do you know any of these people?” She asked him in Afrikaans. There were twelve photographs. Corrie took his time studying each one, pretending that he wanted to recognise them. He tapped on the middle photo in the second row.

“Dido,” he said, using the word he had often heard Meisie using when she had spoken to him on the ward. He tapped the photo again and nodded, “Dido.” He continued examining the other photos, but left his finger on the photo of Meisie.

The woman pulled the folder towards herself and asked him if his name was Konrad.

“I don’t know,” said Corrie after a short pause.

“Where were you born?” Asked the woman. She kept asking him questions, mostly ones she had already asked him. She showed him the photos again and asked him if he recognised them. Corrie developed a stinking headache, and told her so, but she carried on asking him questions.

“I don’t know and my head is hurting,” said Corrie, “You are hurting me. Why are you hurting me?”

When the woman continued plying him with questions Corrie shook his head and covered his ears till the woman gave up and left. A short while later the man with the gun and baton came back. Corrie obediently walked ahead and into his cell which was locked behind him. He drank more water, then sat and finally lay on the bed. He slept eventually and was certain that the door was unlocked as soon as he fell asleep. The woman again. He was shown the same photographs and asked the same questions. Corrie responded the same way but added that he was hungry.

Corrie lost track of time and started coughing a lot. He felt a dull ache in his chest. A man examined him in his cell when the cough got so bad that the woman started wearing a face mask.

Corrie was given cold scrambled egg with bits of sausage in it and warm sweet coffee. He ate gratefully, then promptly threw it all up. Between coughing and puking and the splitting headache he was finding it hard to maintain his act as a senile old man. He drank some water, threw up again, drank more water and then lay on the bed, exhausted. Somehow he fell asleep.

Back in Hospital - briefly.

He woke up with someone tugging on his arm. Two men lifted him onto a gurney. They both wore face masks. Corrie was wheeled into an ambulance and woke up in a familiar place. He recognised the nurse when he woke up. She looked concerned and angry. Corrie was handcuffed to the bed again. He was in the bed furthest from the door this time. His headache was much reduced but his chest still felt uncomfortable. Corrie was visited twice by the Afrikaans speaking woman. She seemed uncomfortable and told Corrie that he had a chest infection and that his lungs had been damaged in an accident. The next day Meisie ran into the ward during visiting time. She looked worried and thinner. Corrie smiled and said, "Dido," which made Meisie laugh, though she had tears running down her face. She took his hand and kissed it, before holding it against her chest. She didn't speak much and cried when she had to leave.

Three days later she visited again, and seemed much more controlled. She hugged him and pressed another message into his hand, which he read when he was un-cuffed and allowed to use the toilet after the evening meal.

"Sasha's man wants you to get out of the handcuffs and downstairs tonight. There is a pin in your mattress under your pillows. Wait till the midnight bells. Do not trust anyone."

Corrie had no trouble opening the cuffs. There was no sign of the security man when he made his way barefoot down the stairs at the midnight bells. A shadowy figure flashed a torch light at him and beckoned him from the carpark when he poked his head out the door. Corrie donned his crocs and moved quickly out to the carpark. He was carrying the handcuffs to use as a weapon. A sleek looking Audi moved forward as he approached and the door behind the

driver opened. Corrie recognised Meisie's face under a hoodie and climbed in as the car moved briskly away. Meisie didn't speak, but reached for his hand and pressed something into it. Corrie realised it was a pocket knife. He put it into his tracksuit pocket. The driver had a hoodie on, and Corrie could not make out his face in the rear view mirror till they were on a dual carriage way and overtook a truck. It was one of the men that had been on the train with him from Kyiv.

"What happened to Peter?" asked Corrie.

The Ukrainian man said something and he and Maisie spoke for a while before Maisie told Corrie that Peter was dead. The Ukrainian man spoke again and Meisie translated, "He says that it is very dangerous to use any type of phone. The Russians are able to monitor all conversations. He says they used special drones to kill the others - the drones follow the satellite phone signal."

They swapped the car for a pick-up truck and drove into an industrial area. Corrie tensed when they slowed and drove past a bar with several military vehicles parked outside.

The Ukrainian spoke again, he sounded amused. Maisie answered curtly and the Ukrainian spoke again.

"He says I must tell you that I don't trust him because he is a Russian speaker. He thinks it is funny because I am also a Russian speaker," said Meisie sounding cross, "I don't trust anyone, and that is safest."

The Ukrainian spoke again, more gently, as they slowed and stopped in front of a high gate.

Stephan the Spiderman thief

"He says we should be safe here. There are many places to hide here, this is a very old mine," said Meisie.

The Ukrainian switched off the headlights but left the engine running and got out of the vehicle. He tapped sharply on the gate and after a while someone shone a torch from a small portal in the gate. A

few seconds later the gate rolled open. The Ukrainian got into the vehicle and drove forward and kept moving as the gate closed behind them. The yard was crammed with broken down trucks and machinery. They drove along a track and into an open warehouse, which also contained broken down trucks. The Ukrainian switched off the engine then turned and grinned at Corrie, putting out his hand.

“Stephan – nice to see you again Colonel, sorry my English not so good. Maisie good girl. Good English.”

Corrie shook his hand and thanked him. He sensed Meisie relaxing a little. Stephan used a torch to guide them to the back of the warehouse and down some steep metal stairs. Corrie had started to feel cold in the warehouse, but after twenty minutes of going down stairs he was warm and breathing hard.

Stephan led them into a room where there were several camp beds along one wall and crates stacked like shelves along the opposite wall. He switched on the lights and pointed at the crates, speaking in what Corrie guessed must be Russian.

“He says there are clothes, food and... things. We should help ourselves. There are two other people here. They are hiding from the Russians too, but we should not tell them who we are.”

Stephan handed Corrie a pistol and a spare magazine from one of his pockets. Then smiled and said something.

“Now he must go and drink with his Russian soldier friends,” Meisie translated.

Corrie took the knife Meisie had given him, from his pocket. He recognised it as the Swiss Army knife he had taken from one of the men that were raping her. He thanked her and handed it back. He was feeling cold again and started searching through the packing crate shelves for better clothing. He found some workman’s jeans, a couple of T shirts and a thick padded shirt that fitted well enough, but none of the trainers and boots fitted him. He found a thick pair of socks that helped to keep his feet warm and which made his

crocs more bearable. Meisie had pulled a jacket over her hoodie and was reading the label on a can of what looked like stew.

“How did you find me?” Corrie asked quietly.

Meisie looked up at him and went very red, “I used Viber and Telegram,” she said, “Petra and Sasha talked about what you were doing, I went to Luhansk and then came to Donetsk when I heard about the Russians from Syria being killed...” she shrugged, “Then I got caught by the police.” She looked away.

“Thank you,” said Corrie, “I’m glad that you are talking again, you have a nice voice. What should I call you?”

“I like the name Maisie,” she said, “I did not want to talk because my accent is Russian, most Ukrainian speakers hate Russian speakers. I don’t blame them but...” She shrugged again, “Here most people speak Russian anyway.” She looked around the room, “There must be somewhere to cook and eat food?”

“And a toilet,” muttered Corrie hopefully.

Maisie found a box with torches and batteries in it. They took a torch each and went exploring. The next two doors were locked and had red skull and crossbones signs on them with Cyrillic script below. Maisie said they were Electrical rooms. The next door was partially open and led to a green tiled ablution, with a row of basins, toilets and showers. Some of the doors to the toilets and showers were broken and many of the taps and showers dripped, but there was hot and cold water in the taps. There was a plastic bag hanging from one of a row of clothes hooks on the wall opposite the toilets that had four toilet rolls in it.

The next room had rows of shelves with the remnants of cardboard and plastic cartons on them.

The next room to that was a small kitchen with an enamel sink and a steadily dripping tap. There was a two plate electric cooker, a filthy fridge that was not working, a cupboard filled with enamelled mugs, bowls and plates and a plastic cutlery tray with a motley collection of knives forks and spoons. A broken can opener was tied

to a drawer handle with a piece of string. The drawer contained a box of tea bags and some zip lock bags. There was a frying pan, two saucepans and a stove top kettle on the counter top and a cardboard box with a bin liner in it to use as a rubbish bin.

Corrie turned on the hot plate and it worked. He rinsed and filled the kettle then walked back to the room they had first entered and searched for coffee and things to eat. He returned to the kitchen with a small tin of Nescafé and what he hoped were pot noodles and a tin of what looked like stew. Maisie was not there but he had heard a tap running in the ablutions. He searched the kitchen for a working tin opener and couldn't find one, and was just about to try and use a knife to open the tin when Maisie returned. She opened the Swiss Army Knife and used the tin opener blade to expertly open the can. It was some sort of beef stew with green peppers. He heated it in the smallest sauce pan.

“How did you find Stephan?” Corrie asked Maisie while he waited for the kettle to boil.

“He found me,” said Maisie, “That’s why I don’t trust him. He came into my room during the night and told me where you were. He told me you weren’t talking. He told me to tell the police that I was looking for you and that you might be in a hospital for... confused older people. He said it would make it easier for us to escape if the police believed you were just my grandfather and...” She looked as if she was going to cry.

“If they thought I was a confused old man,” said Corrie, “It worked, we are both free. How did you get away from the police?” asked Corrie.

“Stephan. He climbs like Spider-Man. I think he is a thief,” said Maisie with a disapproving look on her face.

Corrie smiled, “Exactly the sort of friend we need right now. He did rescue both of us.”

Maisie shrugged and then nodded reluctantly, “Yes but he doesn’t tell me anything, even when I ask nicely.”

“Trust is hard, and perhaps he is just trying to protect you. What you don’t know, you can’t be forced to tell anyone else,” said Corrie.

Corrie added boiling water to the pot noodles, then tipped both pot noodles into the pan with the simmering beef stew and mixed it all up.

“Can you cook?” he asked Maisie, “I’m not a very good cook.” Maisie shrugged and didn’t answer.

Corrie spooned some noodle and stew back into a noodle pot and handed it to Maisie, then did the same for himself. They ate standing at the counter, and shared the last of the stew mix. Corrie washed the pan and utensils and left them to dry on the counter. Maisie didn’t want any coffee. Corrie tipped his down the sink after tasting it.

“Do you feel like exploring a bit?” he asked before switching on his torch and turning off the lights.

Some of the doors were locked. They found several rooms that looked like they had been store rooms with wood and metal shelving. There was quite a lot of discarded packing material; bubble wrap, polystyrene and wood shavings, lying around and a few items of discarded clothing. When they had explored the level they were on, they went down the metal stairs to the next level. There was a short corridor with two doors on either side. All the doors had been forced open. They led to store rooms, with floor to ceiling metal shelves, most of which were empty.

The stairs ended on the next level down, a sloping tunnel with a rounded ceiling sloped gently downwards. There were pipes running along the walls and a very rusty narrow railway track in the middle of the sloping floor. A row of metal lockers contained a few broken helmets, mouldy looking mounds of what might have been clothing and a box of corroded torch batteries.

Corrie shone his torch into the tunnel. “Do you want to keep exploring?” he asked Maisie.

She shook her head, “I’m tired.”

They heard footsteps coming down the stairs and switched off their torches. Corrie put his left hand on Maisie's shoulder. She was very tense. After a short while she moved back closer to him, pressing against his side. She made no sound at all.

It was a long wait. It sounded like at least three people. They had not spoken, but one seemed to be wheezing. When they finally stopped and went through a door, the silence was deafening.

Corrie switched on his torch, shielding most of the light with his fingers, he gave Maisie's shoulder a squeeze and started up the stairs, trying to move quietly. Maisie followed him.

Corrie listened at the door before opening it. He had the pistol ready. Stephan was in the corridor, holding a torch and a gun ready. He lowered the gun when he saw it was Corrie. He smiled and spoke in Russian.

"He says he has pizza," said Maisie, "It is getting cold."

Stephan turned and walked into the room with the camp beds and crate shelves. There were two other people in there, sitting on adjacent camp beds. A man and a woman, they nodded at Corrie and Maisie but did not get up or say anything. Stephan gestured towards the other side of the room where a large red rectangular carry bag lay on a camp bed. He spoke in Russian, and ended with "Bon Appetite."

Maisie unzipped the bag and Corrie smelled the pizza before she opened the box. She grinned widely and said something to Stephan who laughed and shook his head, clearly declining pizza. He pulled a camp bed close after Maisie had sat and started eating as if she hadn't eaten for a week.

Corrie took some pizza, it was still warm and tasted good. He thanked Stephan in Russian and Stephan smiled back. He spoke in Russian, then looked to Maisie to translate. Her mouth was almost comically full.

She bobbed her head a few times, chewing furiously before swallowing.

“He wants to know what you want to do,” said Maisie.

“I don’t understand,” said Corrie, “I thought Stephan had a plan to get us back to Kyiv?”

Stephan explained through Maisie that he had work to do in Donetsk. He had left Corrie at the hospital after the others had been killed. He had contacted Maisie after Major Vesty had informed him that she had been picked up by the police in Donetsk and handed over to the SBU. One of the SBU was working for Major Vesty, but he was low level. Stephan had no safe way of contacting Major Vesty. He had a receiver, from which he got messages and information, but he had destroyed his transmitter when it became clear that the Russians could pinpoint their location. Major Vesty had asked Stephan to rescue Maisie, but he was not sure if Major Vesty was even aware that Corrie was alive.

Corrie asked Stephan, through Maisie, what he was doing in Donetsk. Stephan replied that his main job was to find people who were in danger from the SBU or the Russian FSB and help them to hide, but that he also stole documents for Major Vesty.

Corrie asked if there were any more snipers working for Major Vesty that he could contact and was told there were not. As far as Stephan was aware he was alone. He did not even know the identity of the SBU agent that was working for Major Vesty but assumed it was one of the two that were being interrogated by the Russian from Syria who had not been killed at the airport.

“What do you know about the Russian?” asked Corrie.

Stephan said he knew where he was, and that he was feared even by the other Russian military.

“Can you get me close enough to kill him?” asked Corrie.

Stephan shook his head and said that he didn't think that was a good idea. He only had pistols and that getting close enough to use a pistol would make it a suicide mission.

"Can you get me a rifle?" asked Corrie, "Even a hunting rifle?"

Stephan got up and walked around stretching his arms and neck muscles before saying that he would try, but he wasn't sure that it was a good idea. The SBU thought they had killed all the insurgents and life would get difficult again if another Russian was assassinated.

By the time Corrie and Maisie finished the Pizza, Stephan and the other couple were asleep. Corrie said he wanted to shower and found a towel and some soap. Maisie waited outside the cubicle while he showered, and stared horrified at his chest when he came out with the towel wrapped around his waist.

"What happened to you?" she asked.

Corrie shrugged, "I don't really know. They operated on my chest. It doesn't really hurt anymore."

Maisie had gone very pale. She nodded and asked if he would wait while she showered.

Corrie slept well and woke when Maisie shook his shoulder. They were alone and Corrie felt disoriented.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"There is someone else here," whispered Maisie, "Stephan and the others went a long time ago, but someone is using the kitchen. I can smell cooking."

Corrie sniffed, there was definitely a hint of frying bacon.

"If someone is cooking, they probably belong here," he said, "But we should stay out of sight."

“Stephan should have told us if there was someone else here,” said Maisie. Corrie could see that she was frightened.

“It’s alright Maisie,” he said, “Stephan is all alone and doing a really dangerous job. He just forgot. Somebody opened the gate for us when we arrived, do you remember?”

Maisie relaxed a little and nodded. Corrie saw that she had been holding the Swiss Army knife with the blade extended. She went red and unlocked the blade.

“Do you know how to use a pistol?” Asked Corrie.

Maisie shook her head.

“Well, as soon as we know it is safe, I will show you,” he said, “Perhaps we can find somewhere to fire a few shots.”

Maisie nodded, “I would like that,” she whispered, “How old were you when you learned to use a gun?”

“Nine I suppose, but it was just an air gun,” said Corrie, “I used to shoot rats that were stealing food from the store room.”

“Did your father teach you?” asked Maisie.

“Well it was one of the fathers, an Irish priest called Father Michael. I grew up in an Orphanage.”

They sat quietly for a while. Corrie remembering Father Michael, who grew the vegetables they ate and who loved to play soccer with the children. Corrie had enjoyed his time in the Orphanage. There were bad times for sure, but the priests were constant, and Corrie had always felt safe with them. He looked at Maisie and wondered about her family.

“Is your name Dido?” he asked quietly.

Maisie looked up and covered her mouth to stifle a giggle. “You called me Dido in the hospital,” she said, “It means grandfather in Ukrainian.”

“You were calling me Grandfather,” said Corrie, nodding. “I would be very proud to be your grandfather.”

“In Russian we say Dedushka,” said Maisie, “But you can be my Dido. I would like that.”

“It’s a deal,” said Corrie.

They heard footsteps approaching and someone knocked quietly on the door before opening it a crack, speaking and turning the light on. A short, round-faced man stood there holding a plate. He had Downes Syndrome.

“He says it is morning and he has made some breakfast for us,” said Maisie.

The man approached smiling and nodding at them.

He held out the plate, on which was a mound of fried eggs and bacon and two forks. Maisie took the plate with shaking hands and thanked the man, who grinned a happy smile and said something else.

“He wants to know if we want tea,” said Maisie.

“Tell him thank you for the food, but no tea for me,” said Corrie.

After Maisie spoke the man grinned widely again and left, closing the door behind him.

“He is ...a simpleton?” said Maisie carefully, and crossed her eyes.

“No, he has Downes Syndrome,” said Corrie, “He is different but not stupid or simple. “Aren’t you going to eat?”

Maisie looked at him, “He looks like a simpleton, but he is kind.” She picked up a bit of bacon with her fingers and put it in her mouth then held the plate closer to Corrie.

The eggs were hard but tasty and the bacon was just the way Corrie liked it. They had eaten most of it when the man returned with two mugs. He carefully held out one to Maisie, who placed the plate on her lap before taking it. He held out the other mug to Corrie. It had milk in it. The man spoke and Maisie translated, telling him that it was fresh milk from a cow.

Corrie could not remember how long it was since he had drunk fresh milk. He thanked the man and savoured the warm milk. The man spoke a bit more before waving and leaving.

“He says it is time for him to sleep now and says he will make bread for us to eat tomorrow if we are still here,” Maisie translated.

They explored the long tunnel later, walking down the gentle slope for half an hour before their torches began to fade. Corrie was wheezing by the time they reached the top.

“My lungs are not so good anymore,” he told Maisie when she asked if he was OK.

Maisie sorted through and tidied everything in the crate shelves. Corrie rested and helped her from time to time. They talked a lot, and Corrie learned that she had been living with her Grandfather when the Russians arrived. They had knocked her Grandfather down when he had tried to stop them from dragging Maisie out of the house.

Maisie made and ate a meal of chicken pieces in white sauce with small potatoes and peas. Corrie did not feel hungry. He had a stinking headache and worried that he had another chest infection.

Stephan returned looking cheerful and told them it was still early evening. He had brought a large bottle of Coca Cola and some meat pies for them. Corrie forced himself to eat a pie, but didn't want anything sweet.

Stephan said he thought he would be able to get a rifle later in the night, and told Corrie that it would be alright to test fire it further down in the mine. He apologised for not telling them about Mika, who he said owned the yard. He said Mika was a good guy who

minded his own business and did not like any sort of trouble but really did not like the Russians. He left them a short while later and said he would be returning late with the rifle, if he could get it.

Corrie was fast asleep when Stephan returned. He struggled to wake up. His headache was not as bad but he didn't feel right. The rifle was an old Brno .22 hornet. It had a scope, but there was mould inside the scope. The bore looked good. It had a five round magazine and a box of twenty hollow point bullets. Stephan suggested that they test the weapon straight away. They took spare batteries for their torches and followed him down and along the tunnel. They walked for over an hour before they reached a section of tunnel where there were several tunnels branching off from a large circular chamber. Stephan explained that they were mine shafts but that the coal seams were much deeper and the mine had stopped production shortly after the Second World War. Corrie paced out fifty and a hundred metres, and set up two planks from a crate to shoot at. He fired two rounds at each plank, and after inspecting them asked Maisie to lend him her knife. He adjusted the rear sight with the screw driver and fired two more rounds at each plank. He inspected the pieces of wood and nodded.

"This is a fine rifle," he said.

He then spent some time showing Maisie how to hold the pistol and when she had done some dry firing he let her shoot at one of the planks from ten paces. She fired three shots and hit the plank each time.

Corrie and Stephan congratulated her.

Corrie collapsed before they reached the top of the tunnel. He sank to his knees and put his hands on the ground, saying he needed to rest for a while. A few seconds later he blacked out.

He woke up to find himself wrapped in a blanket on a camp bed. Maisie was sitting with her back to the camp bed. She told him that Stephan had gone to fetch a doctor. Someone he could trust. They had not been able to carry him, so Stephan had fetched a camp bed and some blankets. Maisie had the pistol on her lap.

The doctor, a middle-aged man, spoke excellent English. Stephan had brought a wheelchair, and insisted on pushing Corrie all the way back to the top of the tunnel and helping him up the stairs. The doctor examined Corrie thoroughly and asked a lot of questions.

“It would help if I knew exactly what surgery was done on your chest, but your heart sounds good and your lungs do not sound congested. Your temperature is a little high. I am going to take some blood and give you some antibiotics for now. They are strong, and you must keep taking them for two weeks. If your blood shows anything unusual I will get back to you. Do not over exert yourself.”

Maisie and Mika fussed over Corrie. Mika made Borscht and brought them fresh fruit, bread, butter and milk every day. The doctor returned three days later and said that it was an infection. He took more blood but said that Corrie seemed to be responding well.

Corrie walked every day, pushing Maisie in the wheelchair and resting in the wheelchair when he had to. After two weeks he could walk to the tunnel branches and back to the top of the tunnel without ill-effect. The doctor said he was healthy.

Stephan had been busy, and had managed to find and copy Corrie’s medical reports from the hospital. The doctor read them and said that Corrie had been found outside the hospital entrance bleeding from a chest wound. He had two pieces of glass and a piece of metal removed from his chest.

Taking care of unfinished business

Four nights later Corrie went into the city with Stephan. He watched in disbelief as Stephan climbed the sheer looking wall of an office building and entered through window that had not been closed properly. A few minutes later the side door opened and Corrie crept in. He followed Stephan up the stairs to the roof. Stephan pointed out the windows to watch, then rigged up a line for Corrie to abseil off the roof before vanishing without a backwards glance. Corrie watched the windows with a pair of Russian military field glasses. There were four people working behind desks in the offices, using laptops and phones. It was unhurried work. It was almost midnight when the target appeared, the Russian from Syria. A neatly

dressed, handsome young man. He spoke with one person and moved out of sight before Corrie was ready to fire. He waited patiently, breathing in through his nose and out through his mouth slowly and deliberately, keeping his heart rate steady. About five minutes later the man entered another office. Corrie couldn't see his face but was certain it was him from the clothing he was wearing. He put down the field glasses and readied the rifle, keeping the man in the sights. The person he was talking to nodded and turned his laptop to face the Russian, who leaned down and placed both hands on the desk while he studied the screen. He looked up and spoke just as Corrie fired. Corrie fired a second shot into his body and then a third before he left the rifle and moved swiftly to the wall and clipped the rope to the carabiner. He could hear dogs barking and muffled shouts as he walked across the road and climbed into the cab of the waste truck. Stephan nodded and drove steadily, they heard sirens but didn't see any police or military vehicles.

Meisie was waiting behind the gate. Her face pale and anxious.

Stephan left them to go and learn what he could from the pool bar frequented by Russian soldiers. He returned late that night with another pizza.

“He says we should expect to be here for another four or five days at least,” said Maisie, translating for Corrie, “The Russians are concentrating on another city, Mariupol, but most of them are talking about a town called Bucha outside Kyiv; some people are saying Russian soldiers executed over a thousand civilians there. Stephan says the Russian soldiers are sick of fighting in Ukraine. They want to go home.”

Stephan spoke again.

“Stephan says maybe someone in Moscow will assassinate Putin now. That would be good.”

“Well I am not volunteering to do it,” said Corrie, “I've had enough of killing.”

Three days later Stephan told them he had found a way for them to leave. He brought a man with him who he said would get them to

the city of Dnipro. The man did not speak English, so Maisie translated. He said he was taking a bus load of Orthodox Jews to Dnipro and that Corrie and Maisie could travel with them. Maisie would have to dress as a boy. The man returned that night with a woman, his wife, who cut and dyed Maisie's hair and then worked on Corrie's hair and beard. She spoke English and had them smiling with her sense of humour and good nature. She dressed them and inspected them and gave them both hugs and kissed their cheeks. She stayed behind while her husband drove Maisie and Corrie through the city. There were more than fifty people on the bus. Mostly grown men but there were eight young boys, including Maisie. The bus left at dawn. Nobody had paid any attention to Corrie and Maisie. The bus was stopped and boarded twice before it left the Russian occupied area, but the inspections were cursory and they reached Dnipro at midday. Stephan had told them to approach the Ukrainian military and ask them to contact Major Vesty as soon as they reached Dnipro.

Orthodox Exit

Corrie felt a bit ridiculous in his Jewish disguise, the soldiers looked him and Maisie up and down before asking who they were.

"I am a foreign volunteer," said Corrie, "I work for Major Vesty in Kyiv."

The soldiers led them to a police station close to the bus station, where they were asked to sit on a bench. They received a lot of curious stares. Half an hour later they were being escorted to the railway station by a nervous young woman who addressed Corrie as Colonel.

Corrie fell asleep on the train and woke to find Maisie asleep next to him. She had dark circles under her eyes and was very thin, but she seemed more relaxed than she had for a long time.

Kyiv was under curfew when they got there. The Russian troops had withdrawn but the city was still subject to lethal bombardments. Sasha was waiting at the railway station for them, in his wheelchair.

Petra cried when she greeted them and fussed over them both. She had prepared a feast for them.

Later that night, while Petra and Maisie were sat on a rug in front of the fire playing a card game that seemed to involve a lot of shouting and laughing, Sasha told Corrie that Marshal Bilyck had asked to see him, but her doctor had forbidden any visits.

“She thinks very highly of you, Cornelius,” he said, “And was very pleased to learn that you and Maisie were alive.”

“Did any of the others survive?” asked Corrie.

“I am sorry, Cornelius,” said Sasha, “Only you and Stephan. You were extraordinarily successful, but again, the price was high.”

“Stephan is very resourceful; a good man,” said Corrie, “But he is all alone.”

Sasha nodded, “He is a fine patriot, but he is not alone; he is one of many such Ukrainians fighting for this country. Putin has made a terrible mistake. No matter how long it takes, we will keep fighting.

Corrie nodded, “There are no guarantees in war, but I am alive and have a full set of working limbs, which makes me one of the lucky ones,” he said, “But I am done with fighting. I am sorry, but I can’t do it anymore.”

“Please don’t apologise?” said Sasha, “You have done more than enough, and suffered too much.”

“Maisie has lost her papers,” said Corrie, “Can you get her new ones?”

“Of course,” said Sasha, “We were worried sick about her, and so pleased when we heard she was alive. But what of you my friend, what will you do now? Where will you go?”

“Namibia I think, I always wanted to go there. I think Maisie would like it, and we can drive slowly through Namibia to Capetown. I want to spend time by the sea.”

It took a week to get their papers in order. The day before they left Kyiv, Sasha informed Cornelius that Marshal Bilyck had died and asked Cornelius to accompany him. They were driven to the public registrar’s office.

“Marshal Bilyck has left most of her estate to you,” explained Sasha in the car, “You are already a wealthy man, but now, you are also the owner of a portion of Sevastopol as well as the Bilyck conservatory here, in Kyiv. The Marshal wanted to discuss it with you... I believe the Registrar has all the details.”

It wasn’t as simple as that; Marshal Bilyck, had made Corrie the trustee of her estate and tasked him with turning the Bilyck Conservatory into an Orphanage for Ukrainian children.

Petra travelled all the way to Lviv with them. Corrie and Maisie spent three months in Namibia and six weeks in Capetown before returning to Kyiv.