This Is Our Undoing

Lorraine Wilson





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To Granny
For showing me that anything is possible.
I think this would have tickled you pink.

Chapter One

Some days, Lina Stephenson forgot about her ghosts entirely. She almost believed that the miles between her and her family were choice rather than necessity. Today was one of those days, and the last.

There was a storm spinning in across Western Europe, extinguishing wildfires. There were bomb attacks and migrants drowning, but here in the Rila mountains there was only Lina cycling old roads to Beli Iskar, its red-tiled houses dotted between trees and incandescent in the sun. A cat crossed the track and it was still a surprise to see them, after flu and the culls. Two women in their garden shifting logs were watching her. Here it begins.

'Dobro den,' Lina said, lifting one hand briefly. The younger, darker one gave a curtailed nod with her hands full of wood; the elder murmured, 'Dobro den.' Then, without emotion, 'It was dead.'

'Alright,' Lina said in the Bulgarian she had carefully mastered. 'May I retrieve the tag?' They had known she must come and if she got her tablet out she could localise the signal perfectly, but she made no move to do so. The women glanced at each other, then away, and it was the elder who moved into the road, her hand making a graceful gesture that was somehow both inviting and resigned.

She took Lina to the open barn of the neighbouring house, its irregular walls draped in roses and hops. There was no-one around other than the two women, but as always the ancient walls seemed

watchful to Lina, the shadows dense beneath the twisted vines. The dead deer was waiting in the dusty shade, already gutted, hanging from its hocks and skinned neatly, limbs long as if it were still leaping.

'Blagodaria,' she thanked the woman and, as she did so, heard new voices. Three men, the younger woman standing with them in the road, her face turned to the two cows now waiting sleepily beside her, their dark eyes mournful and their bells silent. 'Dobro den,' Lina said again. 'I'm here for the tag.' To collect the tiny data tag either she or Thiago had injected into the thick muscle of the deer's neck three years ago. From it she would learn its last moments, its heart rate, stress level, immune response, reproductive condition. For her research, of course, but first and by the laws of the Environment Security Force who owned this mountain reserve and thus everyone in it, she must distinguish the crime of poaching from a permitted scavenge.

These people would not have dared poach one of the deer, so many of which were tagged. If they took such a risk it was only ever for smaller game, less likely to be missed, but they knew she must check anyway. One of the men, young and corded with muscles and hostility, pushed his way into the garden.

'The tag?' he said, and laughed. At the harsh sound, one of the cows lifted its head, bell singing quietly and the old woman murmured something Lina didn't catch, his name perhaps.

'May I?' Lina said. It was the wrong thing to say, she realised immediately, the request too glaringly empty.

'Will you collect them from us too? When we die? It is not enough that your cameras watch us but you must track us as well, make us animals.' He gestured at the hanging deer, the cavity of its emptied body like an eye and an accusation.

Given the timing, Thiago had offered to run this errand in Lina's place and Lina had said no. Yet now she was hyperaware of her own body, as tall as the men but without their solidity, faster perhaps, not stronger. She had a knife in her bag for dissecting out the tag, but the thought of it skimmed over her mind without traction.

'I know,' she said gently, 'it must feel that way. An insult and

an invasion.' The other men shifted but she was watching this one, young enough to still think he could change things. Perhaps he could, she thought, but not like this. And neither could she. 'I am sorry,' she said. 'I cannot...' the defence she had been about to give died in her throat and she sighed. 'I am sorry.'

The old woman spoke again, 'Let it go, Kolev. Let it go now.' Lina looked at her sharply, thinking that the suggestion in her *now* had been instead *for* now.

'And if she says it was poached, to justify this new law?' It was one of the men beside the patient cows, beside the young woman with her head still averted. He spoke as if to no-one, voicing a thought aloud. The young man stared at him and then spun back to Lina.

'I would not,' she raised her hands. 'If it was gathered then that is what I will tell them. I want this no more than you. You know that.'

They didn't, though – she could see that. ESF's new law had obviously made them doubt her. After all, they only knew her as a foreigner scientist come to study their mountains. Isolated from the politics of nation States perhaps, but still belonging to ESF, who were, on their protected lands and in their own way, totalitarian. She met Kolev's eyes and wanted to say to him, *I understand, and if I were you, I'd fight too*. But of course she didn't.

'I carry an ESF tag as well,' she said instead. 'It is nothing like these,' gesturing at the silent carcass. 'Just location, and life, that is all it does.'

His fists tight against his thighs like he was holding them there through sheer will, Kolev opened his mouth. The knife came to Lina's mind again as his brown muscles moved and she wished now that Thiago had come. But the young woman spoke over Kolev, resting a hand lightly on the shoulder of one of the cows.

'But that is for your safety, doctor. And can you say this is also why they wish to tag us?' She tilted her head, catlike.

'Partly,' Lina said slowly, 'Yes. From accident and ... we think there are traffickers using the border here.' Trying not to emphasise the word *traffickers* in case they thought she knew who else moved through the high passes, and why. She wasn't lying; the people

who smuggled refugees towards covert slavery in the north were dangerous. But the woman watched her steadily and everyone else, Lina realised, watched the woman. Ah, she thought, so it would be this woman's choice whether she were allowed to leave peacefully. Lina was ESF; they would not dare hurt her, and yet the woman watched her for a long time and Lina wondered if the woman could read her past, whether that would be a good thing.

Eventually, with a shrug and already turning away, the woman said, 'Well then, collect your tag, doctor. The deer needs jointing and it is getting warm.'

Lina nodded. The young man glared at her but then swung away, the cows' hooves whispering in the dust and their bells the only sound other than the river and a thrush scolding them from the roses.

It took less than a minute for Lina to pull the tag from a shallow cut in the deer's neck, and when she turned the old woman was holding a bowl in her peaty hands, filled with water for her to wash. 'Blagodaria,' Lina said again, but the woman was already moving away and by the time she was back at her bicycle, the sound of logs being stacked had already begun.

With the tag safely stored, she rode slowly back towards the station. When her tablet chimed, she reached back to pull it out, freewheeling around potholes and the flowerheads of chamomile rising from broken tarmac, but it was only Thiago checking in, so she pinged back a single symbol confirmation without stopping. He was up on Ibar's west slope today and it might, she thought, not have gone any differently back in the village if it had been him there instead of her. For all his physical presence, the villagers hardly lived soft lives, and she didn't think they saw him any differently to her; provisionally accepted, provisionally safe.

The track wound uphill lazily from meadow to forest to meadow, passing a shepherd with his three huge, matt-coated dogs, the sheep's voices fading behind Lina to be replaced by the early grasshoppers' erratic chirrs. Thiago knew, just as she did, about the people who slipped away from the villages to fight or sabotage or rescue and slipped back again if they did not die.

And where she only deleted their photos, he paid attention to the people using the forests and passes, so perhaps he would have recognised that woman's face. But just as Lina had come here to escape London State's eyes, she suspected he had done similar for Spanish State, or the PeaceKeepers, his old force. She didn't know, but she knew the people here were not in any danger from him.

A nutcracker laughed harshly beside the track and another answered further away. Speeding up over the crest of a rise through canopy-spangled light, Lina stopped thinking about secrets and States, something she had become very adept at, and instead listed the tasks she needed to do. The next small mammal survey was due, and one of last year's young bears had developed a fever, so Lina would go in search of her, unhappy with the clarity of the camera images she had gathered. Two jackals had strayed beyond the reserve boundary and Lina needed to decide whether that mattered enough to the population for her to retrieve them.

She was in the older part of the station, once a farmhouse, now their laboratory, when Thiago returned through a dusk stretching itself out of spring and into summer. She heard him washing his hands at the outdoor tap but didn't turn until he spoke quietly from the doorway.

'The deer?' He held his heavy bag easily in one hand, the other rubbing over the dark stubble of his hair.

She shrugged lightly, 'Natural. TB. And they are within their scavenge quota.'

'The villagers?'

She knew what he meant. 'They were okay.' Then, more honestly and because he was watching her, 'some tension. Understandable though.'

'Hmm.' His black eyes narrowed very slightly, but that was all, and then he sat at his desk, stretching one leg, the false one, out with a slight sigh.

She thought of telling him about the woman, asking how they might manage when ESF tagged them all and ought she and Thiago do something to let them keep their secrets. But, prevaricating, she instead ran a quick scan of all her tag data. Carnivora, Large

Herbivores, Raptors, Owls, Galliformes, Bats; each animal's tag appeared on her maps as a galaxy of lights. Most were apparently motionless but a couple, assuredly eagles or vultures, were swinging vast arcs across the landscape. It was a strangely potent sight, a world of teeth and herbivory, birdsong and night-times, all gathered onto her map like jewels.

In the corner of the map window, an amber alert icon flashed. Lina leaned forward, clicked on the alert report and when the comment read only, *short-term offline alerts at frequency above 2% threshold*, she accessed the time stamp and watched twenty minutes of the afternoon replay itself. Short-term offline, yes. But not anything she had seen before. On her map was something passing peristaltically over a forested mountain flank like the shadow of a cloud, a small space where every single layer of tags darkened until it swept on and the tags re-awoke.

'T?' she said quietly, setting the time window to replay, zooming in. He came to stand behind her and they watched it together. A shadow turning all their tags off then on again, and then vanishing itself.

Tags occasionally failed, their tiny thermal-charged batteries giving out for no reason other than chemical churlishness, lightning sometimes, fire or a particularly determined poacher. Weather or satellite movements might chew at the signals, or an animal's burrow reach so deep that they winked out like blown bulbs. All of these faults Lina knew, but this was different.

'Problem with the satellite link,' Thiago said. 'I'll take a look at the connection logs.'

'But the scale,' Lina said. The lab door was still open and a moth flew in as if summoned to reel bewildered against the ceiling. 'It's too small to be satellites.'

Thiago was already moving back to his own desk. 'Maybe,' he said. 'Let me look. I'll check my layers too.' Trees and water, seismic and weather, which she didn't cover. She left it because he was probably right and was better able to check than her. But still, she watched the time loop again, disconcerted. Things that did not fit always disturbed her; it was an old instinct made usually meaningless, now.

'Leave it,' Thiago said abruptly and without turning. 'Check the news. There's something about London. Nothing bad.'

London. Her family was there, her father and adopted brother. She was already clicking away from her data and onto a news feed where headlines were screaming about assassins and resistance plots and manhunts. A name that she remembered distantly, a position of power he had been aiming for even back then.

'Christopher Wiley,' she read aloud. 'Minister for Internal Security. Found dead in his home late this morning by his teenage son. State Investigators are looking for two suspected resistance terrorists.' It was a relief to hear the steadiness of her voice. When she turned to look at Thiago, he was facing half-away but smiling very slightly.

'One less then,' he said, and it made her laugh.

But *who*, she was also thinking. Surely no-one she had once known. It had been years. And then, not entirely disconnected, *the poor boy*.

'It doesn't say how,' she said. 'I'm going to call Dad to check in.' Thiago turned to look at her, the lines around his eyes a little pronounced but that familiar half-smile still there. He cannot have missed her tension, but he only nodded and she left him there to cross the three-sided courtyard into the new house.

On the third floor, past two floors of unused bedrooms, was their kitchen and lounge. One large, glass-walled space that gathered every inch of the vast landscape around them like a gift, or, she thought some days, like a mirror. She always vidcalled her father from here because he liked to see the mountains and she had never dared ask whether that was because he saw little other than tired streets and the city walls or because he wanted to see for himself how far away she was, and how safe.

Those mountains were nothing more than grey-blue outlines now against a darkening sky, but she sat with her back to them anyway, so that he could see.

'Lina,' he said almost before his image had formed, as if he had been waiting.

'Hey, Dad,' she said, smiling helplessly at his worn face, the

half-visible shape of the cat at his elbow. The microphone was just barely picking up Aristotle's purr and Jericho's music pulsing in another room. 'Everything alright?'

'The streets are quiet,' he said. 'There's a curfew and a few more checkpoints. But we're perfectly fine, Lina love. School is open and so is my office. Life continues undaunted.'

Behind him, Jericho slipped into view and Lina waved. He waved back unsmiling, gathered Aristotle up into his arms and moved offscreen with a slow spin, almost a pirouette, the cat cradled against his dark cheek. They barely knew each other, she and her brother, because their father had only adopted him in the short weeks before she left. But she knew these things: he hated blood and moved with rhythm and grace, he rarely sat still; years of their father's love had almost erased the years in the camps. 'You seen any foxes?' she heard him call. This was something else she knew – he loved foxes. Perhaps because they survived the camps too.

'Yes,' she laughed. 'Dad, tell him yes. There should be cubs out soon. I'll send vids.'

Then, when her dad was already talking about neighbours and books and asking quiet questions about her work, she said, 'You will be careful.'

It was unnecessary, but just like he needed to see her mountains, she needed to say this.

He smiled, curled his hand around a mug that she knew would hold tea gone cold, and said gently, 'There's no need, Lina. But yes, of course.'

The first of the night's stars was reflected on her screen, overlaying her father's face. He must be able to see the stars too then, behind her, untouched by light pollution, air pollution, walls. When they cut off the call she could hear Thiago's fractionally irregular footsteps climbing up towards her, and she tilted her head back against the chair, waiting, thinking again, *who had done it*, and, *did she know them*.