

Inheritance

K2
Book 1

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This book is dedicated to my young niece *Hannah*, who asked, and who is banned from reading it for at least ten years after 2007.

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About the series of books

K2 is a series of 6 books. If you have picked up book two, three, four or more - without reading book one - then please put it back down; the story will not make much sense without reading the books in series. They all follow-on closely and previous plots are not re-capped. Later books build on earlier events/characters.

This is a work of fiction, but based on real, current and historic scenarios. All characters are fictitious.

No garden moles were harmed during the writing/research of these books. The author does not advocate firearms as a suitable control of garden pests!

There are many 'facts' deliberately hidden in the book, made light of. 'Many a true word spoken in jest.'

Author's note

'It's largely based in fact. It is written as action-fantasy-fiction, since real life spying is way too boring for a novel.'

Inheritance
Assault
Revenge
Nazi Gold
Endurance
Crucifix

Glossary of abbreviations

P-26/P-27 - Swiss secret sleeper armies

UNA - Swiss Military Intelligence

MI6 - British Intelligence, aka, SIS - Secret Intelligence Service, for overseas operations (non-domestic), aka, 'Circus'.

MI5 - British Intelligence (domestic)

CIA - Central Intelligence Agency, USA, overseas intelligence service

SAS - Special Air Service, British Special Forces (similar to US Green Berets/Delta Force)

SBS - Special Boat Squadron, British, similar to US Navy Seals

DOD - Department of Defense - USA

MOD - Ministry of Defence - UK

NSA - National Security Agency, USA, aka 'No such agency'.

Reported to intercept 'all' the world's text messages and emails.

SOE - Special Operations Executive, British WWII covert operations

OSS - USA, like SOE, WWII, overseas

DGSE - French Secret Service/counter terrorism - domestic and foreign

IRA - Irish Republican Army, terrorist movement

ETA - Spanish/Basque separatist/terrorist movement

Red Brigade - Italian communist/terrorist/crime gang

KGB - Soviet Intelligence, prior to 1990s.

NAAFI - Navy Army Air Force Institute - shops on British military bases.

SIB - British Military Police

BKA - Federal German Police, similar to FBI

FSB - Russian Intelligence, formerly KGB

Special Branch - British Police - anti-terrorism/organized crime

Wehrmacht - general term, German armed services WWII

COBRA - Cabinet Office Briefing Room 'A', used by British Prime Minister for meetings with security staff.

FARC - Colombian guerrillas/communist

British military slang

Oppo - opposite number/close working buddy

Pongo - soldier - derisive

Ponce/poncey - upper class/educated/effeminate - derisive

Regiment - he was 'Regiment' - he was SAS

Rock Apes - RAF Regiment - defensive unit of airfields

Rupert - officer/upper-class - derisive

Beast - punish soldier

Stripy - Air Force Officer, derisive term for ranking stripes

Billets - accommodation/food

Civvy - civilian

Badged - qualified entry to SAS, receipt of cap badge

Best bib and tucker - best suit/outfit/military dinner suit

QT - on the QT, on the quiet

Stag – on guard duty

‘Try and rest,’ the priest softly encouraged, dabbing his father’s brow with a damp cloth, the temperature high for an autumn day in Malta. He idly swiped away another fly, the apartment’s cracked windows letting in the shouts of children playing in the street below, an unseen cat crying out for some attention.

His elderly father struggled to sit up, unable to complete that small movement, the energy had left his frail body. ‘The list!’

‘Rest,’ the priest softly encouraged, kneeling at the side of the bed. Easing up, he took in the rundown apartment with a puzzled frown, the bottles littering the floor, the cockroaches attracted to rancid cat food placed on old newspapers, empty food tins and a large pile of handwritten pages. Fetching water from a rusted tap, he wondered how his father, a very rich man, had come to end up in this squalor.

The priest had spoken little to his father in the past ten years, since his vows. Before that his father had always been distant, but at least approachable when his mother had been alive, fond memories of a pleasant childhood in Basel, Switzerland. The priest had grown up in a large house, always full of interesting people, always the best of everything. Unlike many families struggling through the lean post-war years, they had enjoyed holidays abroad, especially here in Malta. They had been better off than most.

His mother had died after a short illness whilst he had been in seminary, the detail of that illness a shock, only being revealed to him after she had passed away. Returning to their home in Basel for the funeral, he had found it stripped of everything, his father offering a single ‘goodbye’ as they passed at the cemetery. Now, little more than a year later, his father had summoned him here, a cheap apartment on the island of Malta, living in squalor, an old revolver visible under the pillow.

The old man tried to speak, lifting a shaky hand. ‘Buried in Zug... buried the treasure ... Nazi treasure.’

The priest stared hard at his father, not sure he had heard the words correctly, a chill running through him. ‘Nazi ... treasure?’

‘Buried ... next to the treasure ... the files ... files of great value. The list!’ The words were repeated many times, the old man

using his remaining energy to desperately force them out before he slipped into unconsciousness.

Unable to rouse his father, the priest lifted the pile of handwritten notes, scanning the first page whilst he considered fetching a local doctor, and debating how he might go about finding such a person at this late hour. He took several measured steps towards the door as a cat cried out again, enough time to read the first paragraph. He stopped dead. The written words caused him to turn, and to stare open-mouthed, at the seemingly lifeless form of his father.

By dawn, the priest had re-read the numerous pages four times, catching only an hour's sleep during the night, the tear-tracks down his face distinct in the amber light of dawn. Setting light to each page in turn, he let the burning paper float down into apartment's chipped and rusted bathtub, staring at them as they changed colour and slowly folded in on themselves, their hideous story lost forever. Gathering up the brittle ashes, he flushed them down a yellow-stained toilet, another cat crying forlornly at him through a cracked bathroom window. Returning to the bedroom, he snatched the pillow out from under his father's head, placed it over the old man's face and pushed down with force and anger in his arms.

'Forgive me, Lord,' he said in a strained whisper as he pressed down.

Leaving the apartment, and trying not to trip over the dozen hungry cats littering the stairway, the priest considered the final line his father had written, and what it might mean: 'Find the Englishman, Beesely.'

Dallas, Texas.

The police officer released the safety on his rifle, and waited; calm, confident, resolute in his beliefs and his purpose. A moment later cheering signalled the approach of President Kennedy's motorcade, the procession visible now through a crack in the wooden fence he now stood hidden behind. The officer had just a few seconds to make a choice that might change history, his grip on the rifle tightening.

As he observed his intended target three shots rang out, distorted echoes bouncing off nearby buildings, an overlapping chorus of screams and shouts rising up. He felt oddly relieved, and heaved an involuntary breath. Lowering his rifle, he peered over the wooden fence at the chaos. In his black and white police motorcyclist's helmet, he studied the scene through his sunglasses: the President was slumped forwards, not a visible target, not that it mattered now, it seemed the job had been done.

The rifle's barrel and stock were unclipped in haste, the weapon now a third of its original length. His motorcycle's pannier hung open ready and the rifle parts fitted well, covered in a moment as the pouch clipped shut. Throwing a leg across, he pushed the bike for ten yards, free wheeling before starting it. Pulling off quietly, he gently accelerated, the bike's radio buzzing with shouted orders and requests for clarification. A quick glance over his shoulder confirmed an empty parking lot.

With the sun beating down on deserted streets, he drove four blocks, the only thought on his mind being what a pleasant day it was for such a cold act. He pulled into the next alley. Turning hard and then braking, he passed under a shutter door being held open for him, halting with a squeak in the dark interior of a large workshop, the shutter immediately dropping down behind him with a clatter. The officer dismounted, kicking out the bike's stand before calmly taking off his helmet. A punctured oil barrel enclosed and funnelled a roaring fire just outside an open rear door, the police helmet tossed in, his sunglasses and gloves inside.

'Any problems?' came a familiar voice from the shadows.

The officer took a moment to adjust to the darkness. 'None at all,' he said in a nasal and clipped English accent, calm and casual as he continued to strip down. 'Our *friends* loosed off three shots,

so one fired twice. Poor old Oswald, in the wrong place at the wrong time.'

'Did you ... need to, you know?' echoed from the shadows.

'No,' the Englishman answered as he undressed, amused by the other man's discomfort.

'And ... would you have?' the second man asked after a moment, standing and moving into the light.

'Without hesitation,' the Englishman firmly stated, as if proud to issue the words, grabbing fresh clothes. 'I manage to see these things ... quite clearly.'

The second man nodded, putting his cigarette back on his lip. 'Listen, old chap,' he mocked, stepping closer and checking over his shoulder. 'Family would prefer if you didn't get too friendly with my kid sister given who, *and what*, you are.'

The Englishman attended his clothes. 'Oliver, let's be clear about this; she ... was the one making all the moves. And dare I remind you that it was *you* who introduced us. A surprise given just who, *and what*, I am.' He tipped his head and formed a thin smile as he buttoned his shirt. 'And the good lady is not quite the kid sister. She's twenty-six, divorced with two kids, and could probably drink us both under the table!'

Oliver shrugged a reluctant agreement with that last statement. 'C'mon, old chap. The new Chairman of The Lodge is waiting. He hasn't yet had the pleasure that is Morris Beesely from Englandshire.'

England. June, 2007. The Joke.

Sir Morris Beesely woke from a daydream certain he could hear gunfire. Sitting up and letting down his legs, fogged for a moment, he observed delicate beams of sunlight highlighting dust, his mind still in Dallas on 'that sunny day'. Easing up and stretching, he peered through a crack in the curtains, noting his bodyguard below with a resigned sigh. 'Oh ... gawd.'

Sweat rolled down the bodyguard's face, today being a particularly warm day for stalking prey. He now wished that he had not worn his silk 'Simpsons Family' shorts, they were stuck to his skin.

He stood motionless, pistol ready, breathing steadily. Ignoring any distractions, he waited for the right moment. Nine years in the SAS, ten years working as a freelancer for various mercenary and intelligence groups, he had seen better days; now he had something to prove. He had missed this quarry fifteen times already, but this time it would be different, he told himself. With his weapon held on-target, he wiped sweat away from his eyes with the sleeve of his suit jacket, his sponsor observing unseen from a high window.

Movement. The gunman's quarry foolishly gave away its position. This one would be different, they would see, he could do it. He pulled his sweaty shorts out of the crack of his backside, and fired. Quickly adjusting his aim a fraction he let off six rounds, 'bracketing' the target, spent 9mm cartridges flying high and wide. He closed the gap and fired again at point blank range with anger and determination, willing the bullet into his intended victim.

Nothing. No movement.

He readied his trowel, determined that they were not getting away. Digging quickly, he opened up the mole's latest mound, right down to the small two-way tunnel. Nothing. 'Bollocks!' With a sigh he holstered his weapon, his sponsor turning away from the window.

'Any luck?' his sponsor's housekeeper enquired from the edge of the lawn, the lady stood with a tea towel in her hand.

The gunman lit up as his sponsor came into view. Since leaving active service, and retiring to work as a driver, his sponsor and mentor had been very tolerant. So far.

‘Well?’ the old man asked, no hint of emotion evident.

The gunman lowered his head and dropped his shoulders. Two hours of shooting up his sponsor’s lawn with a 9mm pistol had produced no visible results; no deaths, not even a wounding. The garden moles had won.

The housekeeper was sympathetic. ‘Maybe if you wore your old camouflage clothing?’

Slowly, his sponsor’s features distorted. He bent double, clutching his chest. Laughing hard, but silently, he crumpled and fell over. Bemused, the housekeeper did not understand the cause of the hysterics, rushing to the aid of her elderly employer. She had not meant to be cruel about the gunman’s efforts. The gunman walked inside, his head lowered, checking his watch. The Simpsons were on in five minutes, time for a cuppa.

With his shoes squeaking on the recently polished floor, George Willis, assistant to the new director of MI6, approached an isolated office in the basement of the MOD, Central London. He knocked on the glass door and entered without waiting.

‘Willis?’ The sole occupant squinted over the rims of his glasses in unwelcome recognition of the younger visitor, the occupier half buried in files. The disgruntled employee, fifty-five at his last birthday, sat wearing new red braces over an off-white shirt hiding a slight frame. His grey hair grew thin, his cheeks thinner. After a moment’s thought he jabbed towards the kettle with his pen, a firm hint. ‘Kettle has boiled.’

Willis sniffed. ‘What’s in the kettle, Toby? Scotch?’ he asked with a knowing grin as he took a seat.

Toby stared back for several seconds. ‘It’s the cleaner they use for the lino on the floor, it smells terrible,’ he stated. He threw down his pen, eased back and took a big breath. ‘So what brings you down to purgatory?’

‘Well, you’re really, really old, *and* rumoured to be a really sneaky shit.’

Toby forced up his eyebrows in theatrical surprise. ‘Compliments already, you must be after something.’ He folded his arms.

Willis eased back and crossed his legs. ‘Sir Morris Beesely.’

Toby allowed himself a thin smile, an old memory surfacing. ‘That name takes me back to the good old days; long lunches, fiddling your expenses, being politically incorrect, *genuine* enemies to spy on. He was *old school*, proper spy. Knew Ian Fleming they said.’

‘What’s he like?’

Toby frowned in surprise. ‘Beesely? God, is he still alive?’ he asked as he poured out two small drinks.

‘Yes, apparently. Someone lifted his old personnel files, so Madam *will not* be pleased. That is, of course, if I tell her.’

‘Ah yes, the new lady of the manor, Dame Helen Eddington-Small. How long now, three weeks in the hot seat?’

Willis nodded. 'She's not one of the boys, but better at her job than –'

'Certain *age-ed* gentlemen,' Toby finished off without looking up.

'So what about this Beesely character?' Willis pressed.

Toby curled a lip as he thought back to his early career. 'He was quite the lad. Excellent at his job, don't get me wrong, but always managed to get into trouble and, strangely enough, he always managed to get away with it.' He lifted his head, staring out of focus. 'Bit of a ladies' man if I recall, even in later life.' He focused on Willis. 'Anyway, they never managed to make anything stick. Not even that Kosovo thing.'

'Kosovo?' Willis challenged. 'That would have been well after he retired.'

'AGN Security Limited,' Toby whispered, glancing around the small office, despite the fact that they were the only occupants.

'I know the outfit. What about them?'

'They're heaped full of ex-SAS muddy-boot-wearing types. Unofficial recruiting ground for your more energetic field agents... *when* the lads are short of money, of course.'

'So what's the connection?' Willis asked, hiding a smile.

Again, Toby curled his lip, giving a slight shrug. 'Beesely used to own it, may still do. Madam's illustrious predecessors used to sub-contract the odd job to AGN - *plausible deniability*. But I had heard he retired from all that long ago.'

'Got a photo?'

'Why, lost his file?' Toby pointedly enquired.

Willis heaved a sigh. 'Photo?' he pressed.

'Only in my mind,' Toby mouthed in an exaggerated fashion. 'Five ten, thin, bit of a stoop, walks quickly.' He shrugged, grimacing. 'Bald, thin face. Looks like someone of his age, I suppose. Saw him last year - well, maybe five years ago - at a reunion bash somewhere. Can't remember where, so it must have been a good one. Still sharp as a tack, mind you. He remembered me, and all my ... *misdeemeanours*.'

'Didn't catch you drinking on the job, did he?' Willis took a sip and winced. 'So what's this Kosovo thing you mentioned?' he coughed out.

Toby grinned at his visitor's discomfort. 'It happened during the early days of the conflict, when I had a desk with a window.'

Beesely sent recon' teams in under the radar. Some got themselves caught, but the *powers that be* wouldn't send a rescue after them, so *he* funded one himself. He rescued some ex-SAS trooper by sending in some other ex-SAS trooper. It's quite *the* after-dinner story in some circles.' Willis' expression suggested they had the time. Toby reluctantly continued, 'Well, this one ex-SAS guy, a freelancer for Madam's predecessors, Ricky something if I recall, he went in after Johnno. That's Beesely's driver now, by the way, saw him at the reunion.'

Willis eased his face forward. 'His driver?'

'Back then this Johnno fellow was a freelancer for your lot. He went into Bosnia a few times, apparently successfully blowing things up. Whatever. Anyway, he went into Kosovo to blow up some ammo' dump. Parachuted in, walked twenty miles and made a nice big bang.'

Willis offered a look of mock surprise.

'I told you, quite the after-dinner story. Anyway, on the way out he ran into a battalion of Serb regulars. They put five, ten or twenty rounds into him - depends on how drunk you are by this point in the story. Left him for dead.'

'What happened?'

Toby studied the inside of his glass. 'He performed first aid on himself apparently, stitches and everything, radioed-in his position. Powers that be decided against a rescue.' He sighed. 'Bravo Two Zero all over again.'

Willis hid a grin. 'So how did he get out?'

Toby raised a finger and smiled coyly. 'Beesely organized the rescue, that guy Ricky plus some Kosovan Albanian resistance fighter. Not only did your lot not help, they threatened Beesely. He sent a rescue anyway, all organised in just a day apparently. This Ricky was some big deal agent. He walked across the border, found Johnno, and carried him out.'

'Carried him?'

'On his back, apparently, so the story goes; thirty miles to the border, dodging the Serbs. Some say Ricky carried him for three days without sleep. Who knows? Anyway, they had to shoot their way out, American helicopter picking them up on the Macedonian border.'

'Why on earth would the Americans pick them up, especially if AGN sent them in, a civilian outfit? And a Brit' firm at that!'

‘Big ... mystery.’ Toby mouthed the words carefully, again glancing around the room. ‘Another rumour about Beesely – he was always very friendly with the Americans. Anyway, rest is sketchy, rumours of this pair landing on a Yank aircraft carrier, stitched up and flown to Italy and another *Yank* hospital before turning up back here. His driver, this man Johno, he spent a year in rehab.’

‘What does this ... Johno look like?’

Toby ran a forefinger and thumb from below his nose, edging his mouth, and squarely down to his chin. ‘Old school trooper moustache – Mexican bandit - long sideburns, crew cut on top. Stocky, five ten. Wouldn’t want to nudge his elbow in a bar, dangerous eyes. Spoke to him at that function, or the one before.’ Toby curled a lip. ‘He drinks a lot, very sarcastic and negative.’ Willis raised an eyebrow and suppressed a smile as Toby poured himself another drink. Toby continued, ‘Big enquiry by your lot as to how that pair got out. Anyway, they arrested him, Beesely that is. Next thing we know all - charges dropped. I told you, he always got away with it. Maybe the Queen helped.’

Willis uncrossed his legs and straightened. ‘The Queen?’

‘Strange trivia fact; she and Beesely met up once or twice a year, every year, for sixty years. They have, apparently, known each other since 1944.’

‘Well,’ he said as he stood. ‘I’ll be leaving with more questions than I came in with.’

‘Enlightenment is what I’m here for.’

‘That guy Ricky, he was working for Beesely’s firm at the time, AGN?’

Toby formed a thin, humourless smile. ‘Nope, he was on your books. He and Beesely knew each other through Trooper Snoopers.’

Willis tipped his head. ‘Trooper ... Snoopers?’

Toby glanced around the empty room. ‘That unit that isn’t supposed to exist. They draw officers and men from all services, just for a year or two.’

‘To do what?’

‘Check up on ex-servicemen after retirement, former officers from delicate positions, to see that they’re not writing their memoirs or married to a Russian ballerina named Olga. They also

spy on ex-SAS troopers, see what they are up to. Mostly SIB flatfoots, and some of your lot.'

'I don't think I've ever heard of it.'

'Like I said, it isn't supposed to exist,' he said with a smirk, 'but I see the funding!' He tapped the files in front of him. 'Beesely was involved on and off for twenty years, so I've heard, even after he left regular work.'

'Ah ... the fog is lifting a bit.' Willis stepped to the door, turned and shrugged one shoulder. 'See you at Christmas then, I suppose?'

Toby stared. 'How many uncles do you have?'

2

'What's up, Doc?' Johnno asked.

The grey-haired psychiatrist rolled his eyes, gesturing John 'Johnno' Williams towards a seat, the roar of London traffic a dull drone in the background. This was Johnno's regular monthly session, the psychiatrist's offices on the second floor of a drab building off the Tottenham Court Road, central London.

Johnno picked up a pink squeeze-ball and slouched down. 'It all started when I was a schoolboy,' he said with mock seriousness. 'Teacher touched me up.'

'Did he?' Doctor Manning probed as he settled himself, finally facing his patient.

'Hah! That would give you something to scribble down.' Johnno sat upright. 'Anyway, why don't you scribble down stuff any more? You used to.' He ran a hand down his bushy moustache.

'I gave up on you long ago, you know that,' Manning dryly stated.

'Broke you, I did.'

'You certainly gave me a run for *your* money.'

'Beesely's money, waste that it is,' Johnno retorted as he glanced out of the window.

'Do you think your time here has been wasted?' Manning posed, easing back and now holding his pen between both hands.

'Ah, the *serious pen* stance,' Johnno teased. Suddenly self-conscious, Manning put the pen down. Johnno tossed him the squeeze-ball. 'Try that, you look stressed. I have that effect on people.'

‘I must admit, Johno, you are a ... perplexing character.’ Manning placed down the ball, interlacing his fingers.

‘Me? Nah, two dimensional me.’

‘Hardly. You’re far more complicated than most give you credit for.’

Johno squinted. ‘Most?’

‘I assist a lot of soldiers, some know you.’

‘And you discuss *me*?’

‘Not directly, but some are former SAS, and they recall experiences ... and people. You crop up a lot actually. And I use your ... *experience* as an example.’

‘Do I get a commission?’

Dr. Manning could not hold in the smile. ‘So, Johno, how have you been?’

‘Up and down, not enough side to side. Usual. Still drinking too much, bad dreams, leg hurts. Can I go now?’

Manning lifted his hands, offering two open palms. ‘No one is forcing you to come here –’

‘Not quite true, Doc. Beesely gives me money for the hotel and ... *expenses*, so I go lap dancing, burn up a few weeks’ pay. I’d come here every frigging week if he paid.’

Manning let out a breath. ‘Well, it’s nice to know there’s no ulterior motive for you attending these sessions.’

‘So, what did you want to discuss this month, Doc?’ Johno asked with a wry smile.

‘What would *you* like to discuss?’

Johno sighed. ‘How many times have you asked that?’ He waited. ‘And how many times have you got a straight answer?’

‘It’s a requirement. It’s what they teach us shrinks on day one at shrink school.’

Johno laughed. ‘See, isn’t this more fun when we take the piss out of each other?’

‘Well, I would actually like to earn my pay.’

Johno adopted his best attempt at a serious expression, resting an elbow on the chair arm. ‘I feel cured. Just tell me where to sign and I’ll let you off the hook. Is there a standard form? Patient self-cert’ of sanity?’

‘If only it was that simple. So, how *have* you been, Johno?’ Manning pressed.

‘Fine.’ Johnno took a big breath, becoming genuinely serious. ‘I’m forty-six in a few months. I can’t run too well because of the knee, I shag prostitutes because I don’t want any women to see the scars, and I can’t spend the night with anyone because of the shouting nightmares. So I get hammered quickly, just before bedtime. Bad for my health I know, but simple.’

Manning studied him. ‘And you seem to accept it.’

Johnno gave it some thought, shrugging. ‘What else should I do? Make you happy and get all morbid and moody, fit neatly into one of your psycho-models? Look, Doc, my head isn’t injured, my body is. If someone loses a leg they get a plastic one. I got some scars, so no swimming in the public pool. Simple. I dream fucked-up scary stuff, so I drink. Simple ... and practical.’

‘Quite practical. You seem to see all your problems as just that, problems to be solved in the real world.’

Johnno offered Manning a teasing grin. ‘As opposed to the Twilight Zone that some of your patients visit?’

Dr. Manning sighed. ‘No, the real world out here, not in the sub-conscious mind, which is where I spend most of my time.’

‘Is it dark? Do you, like, take a torch?’

Manning sighed again, long and hard. ‘Where did I put that “cured” rubber stamp?’

‘With the rubber mallet for difficult patients?’

‘So,’ Manning started again, a big breath taken in and let out, ‘how’s Beesely these days?’

‘Doing better than me. He’s still sharp as a tack, and in better health. Eighty now –’

‘Seventy-nine. Eighty in three months,’ Manning corrected.

Johnno stared at the floor. ‘Remind me closer to the time, always forgetting his bloody birthday.’

‘Did he ... *appreciate* the lap-dancers you got him last year?’

‘Nah, he let me enjoy myself. But you and I both know he lives his life through my eyes.’

‘Quite an insightful observation,’ Manning said, his eyes narrowing as he focused on Johnno.

‘Why else would he keep me on? He doesn’t need a bodyguard, and he can still drive himself, just about.’ Johnno shrugged again, glancing out of the window at the bustling London thoroughfare below.

‘Maybe he has just gotten used to you, and all your annoying habits.’

‘Maybe he’s just afraid of burglars,’ Johno quickly retorted.

‘I don’t think Mr. Beesely is afraid of anything.’

Johno squinted, focusing on the psychiatrist. ‘You and he go way back.’

‘A long time, yes. Perhaps thirty years. I was retained by MI6, sorry ... SIS these days, working with agents returning from imprisonment abroad.’

Johno winced. ‘That must be tough, twenty years in a fucking Siberian Gulag.’

Manning nodded, alone with his thoughts for moment. ‘Some had great difficulty adjusting.’

‘So I’m lucky, still functioning up top, all right as rain.’

Manning again hid a smile. ‘How’s Beesely’s housekeeper, Jane, these days?’

Johno tipped his head and studied the psychiatrist. ‘As far as I remember ... that’s the first time you’ve ever asked.’

‘You all live together, so she must play a part in your life. You admitted before to treating her like a younger sister.’

‘And see where that got me! You talking about family for a whole year, twelve sessions in a bleeding row.’

‘So, how is she?’ Manning pressed.

Johno glanced out the window. ‘Same as ever, just as fucked up as me. Anorexic, cries in her sleep, doesn’t leave the house or Beesely’s side. Like a ten year old.’

‘You sound ... *harsh*, and yet you were almost jailed two or three times looking out for her?’

Johno made a face. ‘When I first started working for old man Beesely he ordered me to protect her, you know, part of the job. He also told me not to show any interest in her. Fat chance of that, no pun intended, she’s a walking skeleton.’ He turned away again.

‘There is a difference between protecting someone, and chasing a bag snatcher then beating him to a pulp.’

Johno focused on Dr. Manning. ‘That’s my anger issue, as we labelled up years ago, not about ... her.’

‘Are you sure? Are you sure that you don’t actually feel better about yourself ... when you look out for others, especially a frail and anorexic woman?’

‘I’ve never wanted a puppy, Doc, so no,’ Johnno stated in dismissive tones.

Manning sighed. ‘I must be keeping you from some young lady with large breasts and colourful tattoos.’

Johnno stood, a beaming false smile. ‘Pleasure, Doc. As always.’ On the street, he lifted his mobile and dialled. ‘Hello?’

‘Hello?’ came a woman’s voice.

‘Who’s that?’ Johnno asked.

‘Who am I? This is the Alzheimer’s Association. How may I help you?’

‘Why are you ringing me?’ Johnno enquired, a smile creased into one cheek.

‘Uh ... you rang us, sir.’

‘Did I? Why did I do that?’

‘Are you OK, sir? Is there someone else there we could talk with?’

‘Yes.’ He waited. ‘Who’s that?’

A sigh could be heard from the other end. Johnno’s path was suddenly blocked by a man in a suit stood with his hands on his hips.

‘Still ringing the Alzheimer’s Association?’ a familiar voice asked.

Startled in his recognition of the man, Johnno stared, his mouth opening. ‘General Sir Christopher Rose. Well I’ll be buggered.’

‘Need a word. Private word. Get in the car.’ A car door opened from within by a passenger, a smile for Johnno.

‘Sir?’ Johnno said, bent double and facing the passenger, lost for other words as he recognised the second man. A firm nudge on the shoulder, and Johnno eased in. ‘My mum told me never to get in cars with strange men.’

The General eased into the front passenger seat, the car immediately pulling off. ‘I think, Johnno, that mothers tell their daughters that with you in mind.’

‘You may be right. Long time, General. Were you, you know, old, wrinkly and bald the last time we met?’

The passenger tried to suppress his smile. General Rose glanced over his shoulder, a hard glare offered, but said nothing.

An hour later Johno sat staring at the wall of a cheap hotel room, several empty beer cans littering the small window table. With pursed lips he blew out, long and slow. 'Bloody hell.'

'We both know you're a good actor,' General Rose reminded his unwilling guest. 'Good undercover. And, in the short term, all we need you to do is to be your annoying self. Keep your eyes open and your ear to the ground. If, and when, over the next few months you happen to hear the name, try and get *the list* – lookout for the treasure. We're not asking you ... to betray Beesely.'

Johno turned his head, making strong eye contact. 'And I wouldn't,' he snarled. 'Her Majesty's Government, bless 'em, left me in Kosovo. *He* got me out!'

General Rose sighed and straightened. 'Let's not go back over old ground. This is about the safety of the UK—'

'Yeah, yeah, we did the patriotic speech bit. I sat up to attention, remember.'

'In effect, we're not asking you to do anything. We've given you the details and the clues, so that if *and when* the times comes you'll know what to do.'

Johno faced the wall again. 'Bloody ... hell,' he let out. 'And what's these Swiss boys' interest in Beesely again?'

'You tell us ... when you find out,' General Rose stated.

'We'll drop you around at the lap-dancers,' the second man offered.

Johno faced his old boss, offering a hard glare. 'Like I could get it up *now*!' He finished the last beer can. 'Any backup on this deal?'

'None,' came quickly back, the reply sounding final.

'Contact routes?'

'The usual.'

Johno stood. 'Love to say that it's been a pleasure, but all things considered, I really wish I hadn't got out of bed this morning, fuckers.' He tipped his head at the second officer and left.

With the door slammed shut the second officer stood. 'Can we rely on him?'

General Rose eased up. 'All our psych' evaluations say he's certifiable. If he were still in the service he'd be sectioned. If he were a horse or a dog – he'd be put down! But I know Doc' Manning, and he has faith in Johno, although God knows why. We

even bugged some of his sessions. He has acute Post Traumatic Stress Disorder; regressive childhood behaviour, shouting nightmares, chronic drinking, hand tremors, the works. He wears t-shirts with little messages on them, phones people at random and takes the piss. About the only adult thing he partakes of is the prostitutes, and even that's weird.'

'Weird how?' the second office asked, dreading the answer.

'Never takes his clothes off, just gets the old todger out, keeping the scars hidden.'

'Why are we even using him?' the second officer complained. 'On something this important!'

General Rose sighed. 'Beggars can't be choosers. And right now he's in the right place ... at the right time.'

Five minutes after the officers had vacated the room an elderly cleaner let herself in, an unlit cigarette balanced on her lip. She reached under the bed, fiddled around and removed a listening device, pocketing it. She took another from behind the mirror, a third from the bathroom before leaving, the beer cans still littering the room.

3

'Not a pleasant way to die.' Willis uttered the words as much to himself as his superior, stepping now across the spacious office of the new director of Britain's overseas intelligence service.

At forty-five she remained attractive, if a little thin in the face for his liking. In her subordinates' opinion, she had earned the post despite being noticeably younger than her predecessors; he regarded her as being more politically astute. He placed the report that he had been reading onto her desk then, as an afterthought, rotated it the right way up for her to study.

She shot him an intolerant look. 'I doubt there are too many *pleasant* ways to die,' she commented, a dry and husky voice out of character with her trim and pleasant appearance.

Willis slipped down into one of two large leather chairs arranged in front of her noticeably uncluttered desk; it supported just two flat-screen computer displays, a neatly recessed keyboard and a multi-buttoned desk phone. 'Not something you're going to want to read before bedtime,' he pointed out as she started to scan

the front page. She raised her eyes toward him without moving her head, then focused again on the report as he pointedly added, 'Or any other time, come to that.'

She hesitated as she held the document, issuing a sigh. 'Give me the highlights.'

'This poor guy was tortured at length. And expertly, might I add. They made sure he stayed awake and understood the full weight and magnitude of what he had done, *whom* he had upset. They administered adrenalin injections, supplemented with cocaine on the gums – finger toothbrush!'

'Cocaine?' she puzzled.

'Apparently it makes the tactile senses stronger, and it stops the attendant party from falling asleep, or inconveniently fainting *too* often during torture.' She eased further back into her chair, her expression blank. 'They took to him with a blowtorch, all captured on high quality video, this guy surviving for some six hours. Towards the end of the tape they, well, got rather nasty with him.'

'Nasty with him?' she repeated with a pained expression.

'Yes,' he grimaced, remembering some of the video images. 'As best we can figure, the victim was *our* Mafia hit man, the guy on our watch list. Not an easy task, getting reliable intel', since these guys play their cards very close to their chests.'

'And our man's connection?' she asked, rising and walking to the window.

'Our man had been tailing the deceased from Italy to Switzerland. Just at the point that our luckless Mafia man was being bundled into a van *our man* became aware of five other men, agents of some sort, suddenly surrounding him.' She glanced over her shoulder briefly with a questioning look. 'Anyway, they politely escorted him back to the Swiss-Italian border, gave him some local wine and cheese and bade him a fond farewell.'

At that Dame Helen turned around, her eyes widening. 'Bade him a fond farewell?'

'With a gift basket of wine and cheese for his troubles. Good quality stuff, apparently.' She lowered her head, thinking hard as she returned to her desk. He added, 'Local police or intelligence services seemed to be in on it, waved them through an impromptu checkpoint.'

'The Swiss Intelligence Services' abilities rank just above those of Luxembourg, and slightly lower down the scale than those

of my local boy scouts,' she illustrated. 'We should know, we used to train them until they went all political in the 1990s. Now the Germans and French train and equip them.' She took a breath, staring out of focus. 'So just what, exactly, is going on over there?' she thought aloud, tapping a foot.

'All we know is that the Mafia hit man, *alleged* hit-man, was linked to those on our watch list, hence our interest. And it's definitely the same Mafia guy in the video.'

She eased forward. 'Which was sent to the supposed Mafia man's boss, found its way into the hands of the Italian not-so-Secret Service, and to us some four weeks later.'

'In a nutshell. Doesn't make a lot of sense I know -'

'It doesn't make any damn sense!' she pointed out. He sank further into his seat. 'This unknown group is well connected - enough to influence or corrupt Swiss police - ruthless beyond Russian standards in what they do to this poor man, but send our man off with a packed-lunch and his tail between his legs.' She pulled a file out of a drawer. 'I've been doing some digging.'

'Oh?'

'I can tie this group in to five other murders with the same taste in snuff videos. Apparently, it's called 'getting the chair'. They were all video taped, all victims sitting in a chair as they're tortured. One lasted fourteen hours.'

He pursed his lips. 'Ouch!'

She regarded her assistant for a moment. 'Yes, ouch.' Focusing back on the report she said, 'All of the victims were male, well built. Two more were Mafia hit men, several were Russians - one rumoured to be a particularly nasty Russian hit man with Chechen links. Another was a former Serbian special ops man, rumoured to have raped and killed the children of a German industrialist before attempting to ransom the father, and one was later identified as a Slovakian planning an attack on the Pope. A very oddly mixed bag.'

He raised his hands, palms upturned. 'All bad boys, no tears shed.'

His boss shot him a disapproving look. 'Perhaps. It's almost as if there is a ... vigilante element to these killings. It's definitely the same group, cheekily confident in their ability to evade the authorities, and cheekily sending in a video each time, usually to the employer of the victim ... or associates of the victim.'

‘Quite a deterrent,’ he emphasised. ‘Any details from the police in these countries?’

‘Nothing. Great professionalism each time by the attackers, not so much as a fingerprint or witness in any of the cases. Suspiciously little evidence, as if the police themselves were colluding across four countries.’

‘That hardly seems likely.’

She glanced up at nothing in particular. ‘Then we have a mystery on our hands.’

Willis stood. ‘Not to worry,’ he offered. She had put her glasses back on and now frowned at him over the rims. ‘Whoever this group is, they’re only killing the scum of Europe.’ He stepped towards the door as she returned to her previous file. Stopping and turning, he said, ‘Oh, one more thing, *completely* unrelated. Some old files have gone missing.’

‘What?’ she barked.

With a pained expression he informed her, ‘Yes ... seems that someone has removed all files that we had on an old boy, well before your time, former section head in the seventies and eighties, a Sir Morris Beesely.’

‘Beesely!’ She jumped up, slamming her hands onto the desk. ‘Oh, God,’ she added, her shoulders dropping.

He took a step closer, surprised by her reaction. ‘This... gentleman is almost eighty years old.’

She forced herself calmer. ‘He was rumoured to have stolen Prime Minister Harold Wilson’s private journals, from Number Ten, in the seventies. We’ve been searching for those journals for a long time. Besides...’

He waited. ‘Besides ... what?’

‘Never mind.’

4

On a small sailboat in a Washington D.C. marina, senior CIA analyst James Kirkpatrick studied the report that had just been placed down for him on the polished galley table. As he read and absorbed each line his face inched closer to the paper, his features hardening, his eyes widening. Finally he raised his head and stared at the elderly, white-haired man sitting opposite.

‘You see the problem?’ the white-haired man enquired, although it had clearly not been meant as a question. He glanced at the yacht’s brass barometer, gently tapping it as the boat moved, a familiar creaking sound issued by the boat’s rope moorings.

‘I do, Henry.’ Kirkpatrick eased back, taking off his glasses. ‘How do you wish to proceed?’

‘Simply close observation for now. We have to be very, very careful with this. When he was active, Beesely knew about our ... *activities* in this area. If he reappears with a connection to this Swiss group just as we are finalising *activities* then, well ...’ He upturned his hands.

‘A serious impediment,’ Kirkpatrick finished off. ‘What’s Beesely’s link to our Swiss cousins?’

‘We don’t know yet, but I have taken steps to find out. Pity is, there’s a prize greatly valued in Switzerland, at least in the short term, if that’s what Beesely and his people are up to ... to get at it.’

‘Do you think Beesely knows what’s hidden in Switzerland? Or what’s hidden within the K2 organisation for that matter?’

‘All we have at the moment is a great deal of K2 intercepts, all concerning Beesely.’

Kirkpatrick glanced again at the report. ‘Do you think they aim to kidnap him, to get information?’

‘Beesely hasn’t attended a meeting for ten years, hasn’t worked on any sensitive projects for twenty. What would be his value to K2?’

‘Well, they’re interested in him for some reason?’ Kirkpatrick pressed.

Henry took a breath. ‘Worst case scenario ... they’ve found something, something old that they think he can shed some light on, from the sixties or seventies - either MI6 business, or possibly us. But as far as I know, the K2 organisation has never shown any interest in *anything* this side of the pond.’

5

‘What kind of man *is* Beesely?’ the front seat passenger asked in a mildly accented voice. The driver turned his head, but the question had been meant for the passenger in the rear.

The three men sat in a darkened Range Rover, the inside even darker than the rain-swept dusk outside due to the vehicles' tinted and bullet-proof glass. Those rain clouds had brought on dusk an hour early on this otherwise mild June day in the English countryside. From their raised positions, the men could see out over hedgerows on either side of the country lane they had stopped in. In the distance they could just make out a large house with its lights on, nestled between a wood and a small lake.

The rear passenger began, 'He's a unique man, and he was a good officer back in the day – a good leader of men. He coined the phrase *leading from the front*. He's also an old-school gentleman, a proper gentleman, not like some of the public school twats that run the intelligence services these days. You could image Beesely on a hunt in Africa with a line of slave bearers behind him.

'I've known him almost twenty-five years, right from my first days in SAS. He wasn't there then, he was working for Army Intelligence, but I heard the stories and met people who knew him. When I did finally meet him I took to him straight away. He's simple in his attitude, no messing about. If he's wrong he'll admit it, not like most of the Ruperts I worked for... who'd do anything to advance their own careers.

'He takes care of his boys, those he sends out. Breaks his fucking heart if one gets hurt. What he did for Johnno in Kosovo was no isolated case, he would have done it for anyone working for him if he could. He's eighty now, but still sharp as a tack and going strong. I haven't seen him for two years, but I don't reckon he's changed much.'

The front seat passenger sighed.

'You'll be fine, boss. It's going to be like frigging Christmas in there when they see me. Smartest move you made - bringing me along.'

The front seat passenger announced, 'I would rather ... climb Everest again than be here. I hate things that are not ... *controllable*, not black and white.' He spoke with a clipped accept, even-toned, and with no hint of emotion.

'Well that's because you're a tight-arsed Swiss banker. No offence. You can control the figures on a balance sheet, but you can't control people, especially not the ones in *that* house.'

'Sir?' the driver asked in English, but clearly not his first language. 'Why is Lower Church Fenton called *lower*, and Upper

Church Fenton called *upper*, when the signs are there ... and this land is flat?’

The ‘sir’ in the front seat turned his head towards the rear. ‘I have wondered this myself. The land here is flat, no hills, yet many place names are ‘lower’ or ‘upper’?’

‘Streams, Boss. The villages are roughly at the same height above sea level, but a stream flows from one to the other, and in the old days a stream was a valuable commodity for all your frigging cows and crops and the like. Downstream was ‘lower’ and upstream is ‘upper’. In those days, if you widened or dammed-up the stream, your neighbours downstream cut your bollocks off.’

The two men in the front nodded their understanding, less so for the quality of the explanation.

‘Great,’ the rear passenger complained. ‘Now I’m frigging hungry. Shall we roll, Boss?’

The ‘tight-arsed Swiss banker’ picked up his mobile phone.

Unknown to the three men, their Range Rover came into view through a night-sight, the central feature of a bright green-grey image. With a gloved finger a button was selected, doubling the magnification, the sight’s built-in software taking a moment to adjust and settle. The vehicle’s occupants were not clearly visible, their general outlines appearing as distorted pale green blobs through the tempered, tinted windows.

The observer focused on the shapes, a wry smile forming. ‘Two, this is One,’ he whispered in an American accent. ‘That vehicle has bullet-proof glass.’

The observer swept left then right, the thermal image adjusting itself. The car’s bonnet displayed as bright orange, indicating heat, the headlights a rich red colour that was being toned down automatically by the system software. He turned on Video Record, a red flashing square of writing appearing in the bottom left of the image, it’s too small to be legible. The laser-rangefinder displaying in the top right hand corner showed ‘60m’; sixty metres. An audible beep in the man’s earpiece caused him to hold his breath. He lowered his stance quickly and put solid ground between himself and whoever else might be around, a large tree and small ditch offering him protection from being viewed with another night sight.

‘Two, this is One. You have movement?’ he whispered.

‘Standby,’ came the confident response.

He listened, unwilling to elevate himself to a position where he could see, or risking being seen.

‘We have two stealthy unknowns across the lake, kitted with night-sights. Two more rear of house.’

‘Am I clear, egress route one?’

‘Affirmative, you’re shielded from both parties. Haul it, buddy, got us some professional company for a change, not just irate Limey farmers.’

Sir Morris Beesely placed down the house phone, a 1940s antique that had been specially adapted for modern exchanges. ‘How very odd.’ He stood at the edge of a large oak table that had been the focal point of family gatherings his entire life. It remained one of the few things that reminded him of the war, his parents and his brother, all now long dead. He remained by the phone, his thumbs in the waistcoat pockets of his tweed suit. ‘Very odd,’ he repeated.

Johno wandered in, slapping a newspaper onto the table. ‘What’s odd, Boss?’ He stood dressed as usual in an old black suit with a clean white shirt.

Beesely stared down at the phone as Johno drew near. ‘That was the auction house up in town,’ he stated without looking up.

‘Sold this old place then?’

Without making eye contact Beesely quietly stated, ‘Oh, yes, my boy, well and truly sold.’ He shook his head slightly. ‘In fact, sold several times over.’

Johno flicked through the paper’s TV section. Without looking up he quietly commented, ‘That auction house *idiot* screwed up and sold it to two people at the same time?’

Beesely raised his head without making eye contact. ‘Nothing so simple, my grammatically challenged little helper.’

Johno glanced across. ‘Uh?’

Now Beesely turned to face Johno squarely. ‘They did not sell it twice, young man, they sold it once ... and for *seven million pounds*.’

Johno’s cheek creased into a huge smile. He faced Beesely. ‘Result! I feel a fact finding trip to Bar-bloody-Bados-in-the-frigging-sun coming on.’ Then he checked himself and frowned. ‘Thought you said that all the work it needed for the listed building status shit ... would make it only worth a million?’

Beesely issued a reluctant nod. ‘Correct. It *is* only worth a million.’ He straightened, staring ahead. ‘And yet, here we stand like a pair of prize tarts on the opening night of a New Delhi whore house.’ Focusing on Johno for a few seconds he asked, ‘Would you be happy ... to retire to Barbados, never to return?’

‘In an instant.’

Beesely carefully studied his driver.

Johno stepped closer. 'Have they ... you know, received the money?' he asked, almost whispering.

Beesely leant towards him, whispering conspiratorially. 'Wired immediately.'

Johno folded his arms. 'Can they ask for it back?'

'Nope,' Beesely shot back. 'Auctions ... have rules, my boy.'

Johno let his arms drop and turned back to the TV section. 'It's their problem then. Someone with that kind of money knows what he's doing. Maybe there's oil under the lake.'

'It's a puzzler.' Beesely breathed out. 'I'd hate to find out that this old place is being pulled down to build the next McDonalds or ... or what am I babbling on about. We're miles from anywhere, the roads are terrible, we sit on the edge of a National Heritage site and the grounds are too small for a weird little theme park of sorts.'

Johno glanced up briefly. 'Know who bought it?'

Beesely tipped his head from side to side, stretching his neck muscles. 'Anonymous. Paid with a Swiss bank transfer.'

Johno controlled his reaction. 'Swiss?'

Beesely took a moment, making eye contact. 'Just because the buyer uses a Swiss bank ... it does not mean that he *is* Swiss.'

Johno shrugged, looking resigned to the fact, stuffing his hands in his pockets. 'They must know what they're doing, not our problem. Let's just pack a bag and fuck off, eh.'

As Beesely held his gaze on Johno, his long serving housekeeper entered the room with a silver tea set. It held a mug for Johno that pronounced 'Passing forty!', its side adorned with a picture of Homer Simpson, belly hanging out.

'You're back early. So what's not our problem?' Jane enquired as she prepared the tea. The two men walked over to where she had placed the tray.

The housekeeper, and occasional secretary, wore a pained expression on a forty-one year old face that typically showed no joy. She often complained about the temperature in the old house, even in the summer, her cold hands the butt of many jokes from Johno. Even when they were abroad together, in the Caribbean or the tropics, she complained of the cold.

'Some silly sod just paid seven million quid for this old dump,' Johno blurted out.

She turned to Beesely for confirmation, her aged employer smiling and nodding. ‘Wow, that’s great,’ she commented in a quiet, West Country accent. ‘What with all the stuff you’ve sold off and the shares you sold ... you’re set for life now. Good for you.’ She poured out two teas.

‘Set for life,’ Beesely loudly repeated, lifting his gaze to the ceiling. ‘I wonder what I’ll do when I finally retire.’ He lowered his gaze to Johnno, who rolled his eyes at Jane’s statement. ‘I can just about pay your salaries now,’ he risked.

It was an old joke. Johnno and Jane exchanged glances, as they had done a hundred times before.

Beesely’s mobile came to life, Johnno hiding a smile; he had downloaded another ring-tone to it without anyone noticing. A mechanised voice began, ‘Ring ... ring! Won’t somebody answer the damn phone? Ring! Hello!’

Beesely focused on Jane as he took it out. ‘Death can come as such a sweet release.’

She gently slapped his arm and scowled as Johnno laughed.

‘Beesely here,’ their employer answered in a high-toned and nasal voice.

‘My name is Otto Schessel, and I am calling from The International Bank of Zurich,’ came an accented voice.

‘Ah, I had been expecting someone to call.’ He glanced at Johnno as he lowered the phone. ‘Swiss bank,’ he whispered.

Johnno’s shoulders dropped. ‘Bollocks,’ he muttered. ‘Knew it was a cock-up. So much for Barbados.’

‘Go on,’ Beesely keenly requested of the voice. ‘You are calling about the sale of Broadlands –’

‘No, sir.’

‘No?’ Beesely puzzled.

‘No, sir. I wish to talk with you regarding your late brother-in-law from Switzerland, Herr Gunter Schappaust.’

Beesely suddenly looked pale, Johnno noticing and jumping to his feet. ‘My late brother-in-law,’ Beesely repeated for the benefit of Johnno and Jane. ‘Would that be the Swiss Nazi bastard, Gunter? That particular brother-in-law?’ He carefully observed Johnno’s sudden lack of interest in the call it.

The caller paused. ‘I cannot comment upon that, sir.’

‘No, of course you can’t, you’re a polite and efficient Swiss banker. Well then, why *exactly* are you calling my good self at this hour on a damp Thursday night?’

‘Apologies for the hour, sir, but this is an important matter. You are the last surviving heir, a distant relative, and your brother-in-law left no will. Therefore, we must speak with you urgently given the large sum of money you will be inheriting.’

‘Large sum of money I’ll be inheriting,’ Beesely repeated with a sceptical look, Johnno now taking an interest. He added flatly, ‘It is my lucky day.’

‘Sir?’ came from the caller.

‘Never mind,’ Beesely intimated. ‘What did you wish to discuss and how, pray tell, would we communicate about this matter? Do I need to fly to Switzerland?’

‘No, sir, I am outside your gate.’

Startled, Beesely clicked his fingers at Johnno. ‘You’re outside my gate.’ Johnno stepped to the window. After a second he turned and nodded, looking all business. ‘Then I suppose we should get to the bottom of this. My man will come out and open the gate; not electric I’m afraid, bit of a chore to open it.’ He clipped the phone shut. ‘Tool up,’ he instructed Johnno, his features hardening. ‘We have company ... and I smell a rat.’ He held up his mobile. ‘And just how the hell did they get my mobile number? This darn thing is an unregistered pre-pay whatsit.’

2

As Johnno walked out to the gate he could feel the Browning 9mm pistol digging into his lower back, cocked ready and stuffed down his belt for the most discreet profile. Stepping slowly, glancing around, each step was loudly advertised as his shoes crunched gravel, a fine misty rain cooling his face. He manhandled the large gate, the old iron squeaking loudly in protest as it was pulled open on dated hinges, gravel being crunched and displaced. He stood to one side and waited, his face and hair now moist.

The Range Rover drew level and he strained to see inside, the passenger’s window already down. Once the headlights were beyond him he could see two men in suits, dressed like ... well... dressed like pin-head Swiss bankers, he considered. The passenger

looked like a nervous Boris Becker with a tidy haircut, Johnno considered. He had tired eyes sunken into a youthful, pale face.

Johnno's concerns ebbed away. 'Evening,' he flatly offered. 'Nice night for it.'

The passenger glanced up at the dark sky and the rain with a puzzled look. 'Nice night for what?' he genuinely enquired, missing the sarcasm.

'For things that you might want to do a night like this, like slug spotting.' He raised an arm towards the house. 'Park anywhere, but not on the flowerbeds, the boss gets pissy when visitors do that.'

Confused, the two visitors glanced at each other as they watched out for non-existent flowerbeds, pulling forwards onto the large gravel driveway, Johnno having failed to notice the diplomatic number plates. And the rear of the vehicle was now passenger free. The passenger stepped down from the car, briefcase in hand, and waited. The driver came around the front of the vehicle; no briefcase, just a bulging chest visible under his jacket.

'Please,' Johnno said, gesturing towards the house, 'go on in.' He slowed his progress, keeping his distance behind them. The two visitors stepped into the illuminated porch. Johnno had just stepped inside when he felt the press of cold metal to his right temple.

'Keep walking,' a voice whispered, a hand now on Johnno's left shoulder.

'Bollocks,' Johnno let out, louder than he'd meant to.

The two visitors had turned, smiling oddly at him before proceeding calmly inside. They walked into the dining room to be greeted by Beesely and Jane sat waiting. As Johnno trailed them inside, he carefully considered his options. Beesely and Jane were both sitting behind the table, Johnno noted as he entered the dining room, the big bullet-proof table with several under-table drawers, great places to conceal a gun. The tables were about to be turned.

The passenger politely introduced himself to Beesely as Otto Schessel, placing his briefcase onto the table before standing off to one side, the driver walking a similar distance the other way. Johnno now stepped slowly towards the sitting Beesely, gun still to his head. His employer's hands had been below the table, but as Johnno crossed the room Beesely raised them onto the table, as did Jane. Johnno felt as though he might explode; he stared so hard at

Beesely he thought his eyes were going to pop out. But Beesely smiled widely, soon copied by Jane. The press of metal against his temple ended, the hand came off his shoulder.

‘Getting frigging old, slow and fat,’ came a voice that Johnno recognised immediately. He spun around. There stood former SAS sergeant Richard ‘Ricky’ Davies, beaming. The ‘gunman’ put his weapon into his shoulder holster. Ricky stood almost six foot tall, a wiry frame with shortly cropped grey hair and a face that made even close friends believe he was contemplating killing them then eating their body parts. Beesely had always remarked: a face that only a mother could love.

Johnno worked hard to control his reaction; this was one man in the world he could not get angry with, no matter what he did. And this was a dirty rotten... ‘Dirty rotten bunch of bastards,’ Johnno began, addressing them all. ‘Bleeding sons of putrid dogs’ bollocks ...’ They were all in on it, he was sure. It was elaborate enough for Beesely to have had a hand in, but it wasn’t his birthday or April the first, no major anniversary, not that he could remember those anyway.

‘You looked shit scared, sonny,’ Ricky teased as he stepped closer. ‘You need a drink?’

Johnno stayed firmly rooted to the spot, muttering every bad word he could think of; a long list. He had been humiliated, scared, the butt of a joke, yet stood utterly delighted to see the man now in front of him.

Jane was the first to Ricky. She flung her arms around him and he lifted her up, her eyes already full of tears of joy. He let her down gently and kissed her on the forehead, Johnno having hurt people for far less.

‘Hey, skinny,’ Ricky whispered. ‘How’re the hands?’ He felt her hands, exaggerating a sharp jerk at how cold they were. She slapped his arm, hard. ‘I told you before, if you want to play with my balls you’ve got to warm up them hands.’ She slapped him again.

Beesely drew level with Johnno, who was still swearing under his breath. ‘Beaten by a better man,’ he whispered as he passed, Johnno relaxing a few degrees. Ricky put out a hand to shake, but was surprised to find Beesely giving him a hug. ‘Good to see you again, Richard.’

The visitor, who had introduced himself as Otto, stood watching, his face betraying no emotion as he studied them all carefully.

Ricky hugged Beesely back, careful to note that he was hugging an eighty-year-old man, even if fit and healthy for his age. ‘Good to see you again, sir.’

Beesely eased back, but held onto Ricky, suddenly becoming serious. ‘Last I heard you were supposed to be banged up somewhere, but no one could find out anything. I would have come for you –’

‘I know,’ Ricky cut in, also now serious, ‘but I have a new guardian angel, thanks to you in no small part.’ He tipped his head towards Otto.

Beesely followed Ricky’s gaze, sizing up Otto. ‘I thought these goons were with you, part of the ... joke?’

Ricky shook his head. ‘He’s the real deal Swiss banker, no joke. I’ve been working for him for the past few months.’ Beesely studied Otto, many things racing through his mind. Ricky added, ‘I was in a Chinese jail for life till Otto here bribed half the officials in chicken-chow-mein province and got me out. They faked my death so that Peking-duck and Ho Chi Min wouldn’t be asking too many questions. Hell, MI6 were not about to swap me –’

Beesely straightened, shocked. ‘MI6 sent you into China?’ Without waiting for an answer he shook his head, walking back to the table. ‘Jane, could you please prepare something for our guests.’ She turned towards the kitchen. ‘And if someone would be so kind as to shut the bleeding front door we will all stay warm and toasty. Except Jane, of course.’

‘I heard that!’ she complained as she disappeared through a side door.

Now Ricky stepped up to a more relaxed Johnno, although Johnno still appeared as if he might clobber someone. ‘How you been then, runt?’

‘I’m an inch shorter, that’s all. And I *can* cook field rations.’

‘You call that cooking?’ Ricky challenged. ‘You ungrateful little shit stain.’

‘Hey, old man, I didn’t alert the enemy by farting too loud!’

‘Listen, sonny, if you weren’t so damn fat we could have got out of that scrape days earlier, maybe weeks, you little whinge bag.’

‘Arsehole!’

‘Toe rag!’

‘Whore house toilet washer!’

Beesely stepped up to Otto. ‘This could go on for a while. Tea?’

Otto gave a slight head bow. ‘Thank you, that would be very nice,’ he said with an accent that Beesely picked up on straight away: German-speaking Swiss. Otto shot a glance at the other man, who immediately sat in the farthest corner, tucked out of the way.

Beesely had followed Otto’s signal around to the second man. ‘Your ... driver?’

‘Driver and bodyguard,’ Otto replied. ‘One of many.’

‘I see,’ Beesely muttered, frowning slightly as he pulled out several chairs around the large table, as if a board meeting was about to be convened.

Jane soon reappeared holding two large coffee flasks, mugs precariously gripped on each little finger. She fetched several best china cups from an old wooden sideboard and a large stack of coasters. Ricky and Johnno were now gently punching each other on the shoulder, talking about an arm wrestle or a race around the house.

‘Ricky, Johnno, front and centre!’ Beesely firmly commanded, noting Otto’s mild surprise. ‘Sit down! And somebody close that bloody door!’

Johnno attended to the door as Ricky sat. Otto sat where his briefcase had been left and Jane stood at the far end of the table, busy taking whispered orders for tea and coffee. She had also brought out a pen and pad, an old habit.

When Johnno returned, still mumbling to himself, Beesely seated himself deliberately opposite Otto. ‘So, Richard,’ Beesely asked whilst staring directly across at Otto. ‘Just what, in exact and precise terms, not withholding any relevant detail, is going on?’

‘Long story, Boss.’

‘Good job then that we have biscuits,’ Beesely cut in with, still focused on Otto.

‘Sir Morris, may I introduce to you Otto Schessel, head of The International Bank of Zurich. And, at forty-two years old, quite likely one of the world’s richest men.’

Beesely appeared as if he was about to say something, but checked himself and turned to Ricky, a ridge creasing his brow. 'Really?'

'Yep,' Ricky replied. 'This guy has more money than God.'

Johnno eased forwards, resting his elbows on the table. 'Bought any nice old English country houses lately, Blotto?'

Otto frowned slightly at the deliberate mispronunciation of his name. Before he had a chance to answer Beesely had turned to Johnno.

'Good question,' Beesely approved, surprised by Johnno's insight. 'Not quite as stupid as you look.'

Johnno gritted his teeth as Ricky laughed.

'Yes,' Otto answered. 'I bought this property today, as you have guessed it correctly.'

'For seven times what it's worth,' Beesely pointed out. 'Not a very smart move. Generous, and gratefully received, but not very smart. And from the same man who is handling my ... *inheritance*. How intriguing.' He glanced again at Ricky.

Otto studied Beesely for a second, then opened his case and took a large brown envelope from the middle of a pile of envelopes and files.

'I was expecting to see your sandwiches in there,' Johnno quipped, Ricky controlling a small, stifled laugh. 'Does your mum know you're out this late?'

Otto did not react as he retrieved a set of house deeds from the envelope. 'This signs the house back over to you, to use as you wish until death,' he stated.

Beesely shot a look at Ricky, noting his coy grin, then just stared across at Otto, his expression blank. There came a long, awkward silence.

'Nice gesture,' Ricky finally encouraged, Beesely not responding.

Otto glanced at Ricky before taking another file from his case. 'Your late brother-in-law left a detailed will that stated ... that in the event of his death, his money was to be used for supporting several political groups across Europe.'

Beesely eased his head forwards. 'On the phone you said that he left *no* will.'

Otto stared back for a moment, then seemed to read the documents in front of him. 'If that version of his will had been

allowed to be executed, many right-wing political groups would have benefited from Gunter's money.'

'You mean ... neo-Nazi groups?' Beesely prompted with a concerned look.

Otto paused. 'Yes.'

'Oh,' Beesely gave it some thought. 'So you, Mister Otto Swiss banker, are here because you do not agree with my late brother-in-laws' will and would rather ... *I* get to choose how the money is used?'

'It is complicated, but in simple terms, yes.'

Beesely sat back in his chair and turned to Ricky, who was now munching on a large shortbread biscuit. 'What's wrong with this picture?' Ricky tried to swallow. 'I mean, call me old fashioned, but I have always believed that Swiss bankers do not go around changing wills, that they take their work very seriously, that they act diligently in the interests of their clients. And yet here we sit, expected to believe that this Swiss banker - generous to a fault in throwing away money on decrepit old houses - has *changed* someone's will so that I benefit. *Little old me.*' He turned to Otto and stared directly at him. 'Were you, perhaps, hoping I might split the proceeds with you in this grand international conspiracy?'

'No,' Otto replied as he pulled out another brown envelope, the top one. 'The money is yours, to do with as you please.'

Beesely started to get louder. 'And just why the hell would *you* be arranging this ... *for me?*' He checked Ricky, finding him still smiling.

Otto opened the envelope and slid an A4 black and white photo across the desk, not dissimilar to someone laying down four aces in a poker game. Beesely suddenly appeared tired, the colour draining from his face. He reached down with his right hand and placed a Beretta 9mm pistol onto the table.

'Boss?' Johnno asked, straightening.

'It's OK!' Ricky assured them all. 'Everyone relax!'

Beesely stared down at the photo of a woman. He ran a finger over the glossy paper, as if running it over the imagined contours of her face. 'You'd better have a very good reason for having this photo, mister.'

His hand remained on the pistol as their eyes met.

'She was my mother,' Otto stated.

Guido Pepi cut the end off a cigar, taking many seconds to light it. He shook the match, reaching across and tossing it into an ashtray on his grand desk before assessing the men ranged in front of him. He eased back into his chair, running a hand through his long silver hair, a glance toward the windows. The moonlight was fighting its way in through the curtains on this warm night in the Tivoli hills, east of Rome. 'So,' he said in Italian. 'K2 has a new owner.'

'It's a trick!' a man complained. 'Gunter's will was altered, or destroyed.'

Pepi nodded; a slow, almost unnoticed movement. 'Of course it was. The original will left his fortune to the Swiss Government, some money to political groups. That was the deal he struck for them to allow his continued existence. This new owner –'

'Is British!' another man spat out, disgusted at the idea.

'The K2 staff will not welcome this man, nor the Swiss people or Government,' the first man suggested.

'We will see, as it unfolds. But gentlemen, it is no coincidence that our two biggest problems have just joined forces, not unless you believe in fate.'

A Roman Catholic cardinal stepped in, fully robed and splendid in his regalia.

'Ah, Cardinal. What news?' Pepi asked, no one making any effort to stand or greet the newcomer.

'The inheritance appears genuine.' Pepi blinked. The cleric added, 'This man, Beesely, was a very distant relative of Gunter, through his sister –'

'Ah, yes,' Pepi let out, tapping the end of his cigar over the ashtray. 'She went to live in England before the war. It would be easy enough for British Intelligence to alter some old records.'

'Something else,' the Cardinal added, his hands clasped as he made his report. 'This man Beesely was a maverick, not trusted by his own people. There is suggestion that he was a CIA plant.'

Pepi eased up, his concerned look noticed by the gathered men.

'Something?' a man delicately enquired.

Without taking his studious gaze off the windows, Pepi responded, 'Any CIA interest in K2 must be seen as a priority. I

have no doubt they would love to get hold of the files, and *the list*. Even more so than the British.’ He turned back to the Cardinal. ‘Kindly make contact with your people in the CIA. Re-acquaint yourself, without explaining just what our concerns are. Do not ... trust them.’

The cleric bowed his head and left, leaving Pepi staring at the windows, a puzzled frown forming.

‘Sir, that bomb is still in place, counting down. They have not spotted it.’

Pepi shrugged. ‘It still suits its original purpose. Let it run.’

3

If Beesely had looked ill before he looked like death now. Inch by inch he lowered his head, his eyes misting over.

Otto continued, ‘If I may explain, it is a difficult situation, a long story. My grandmother was Jewish, a German Jew –’

Beesely lifted his gaze, tapping the photo of his former lover with a finger. ‘Marianne ... was Jewish?’

‘My mother, the woman you met in 1963, was the daughter of a German-Jewish refugee. She adopted the name Schessel. I am, technically, part Jewish.’

‘Which is very odd, considering the position you’re in ... in a Swiss bank,’ Beesely delicately, but firmly, pointed out.

Otto nodded slightly. ‘Yes, it is correct. If this information was known I would not be employed where I am. But I did not apply for any position, I was given the work by Gunter, your brother-in-law. He knew, but hid the fact. He did not wish anyone to know that I was the son of a Jew.’

Beesely rubbed his forehead. ‘Sorry, you were saying something.’

‘My grandmother, she travelled to Switzerland just before the war. During the war she was detained by the Swiss authorities, in a camp near Lugano, being released with the help of her Swiss lover. He disappeared towards the end of the war and she raised my mother in Bern. My grandmother died when my mother was eighteen years old, leaving little money.’ He took a breath. ‘That was when my mother met *and married* Gunter.’

‘Gunter!’ Beesely exploded. ‘*She* ... was his wife?’

Johno glanced from face to face, not understanding.

Otto stared back for a moment, before lowering his gaze. ‘He treated her well enough at the beginning, so I have heard, but spent less and less time with her in the short time after they were married.’ Beesely’s eyes widened, clearly stung by those words. Otto continued, ‘He never let on about his past, his time with the Wehrmacht. In 1963 he found out that a distant relative, you Sir Morris, were working for British Intelligence and he wanted to corrupt you, to bribe you perhaps. I do not know all the details. He sent my mother to try and get you to Switzerland for some reason. She ... was an attractive woman.’

‘The best,’ Beesely muttered.

Otto offered, ‘Naturally, if you wish to have a DNA test carried out...’

Beesely turned his head to Ricky.

Ricky offered him back a confident smile. ‘I wouldn’t bother, I’ve seen the evidence, did some of my own checking. Herr Otto here showed me around the outfit thoroughly. He knew you’d ask the question.’

Beesely focused on Ricky with a hard stare. ‘Would you bet your life on it?’

‘Without hesitation.’

Beesely nodded his reluctant acceptance.

Johno eased up, reached across and had a peek at the photo. ‘Shit, she’s a babe! Know who she looks reminds me of—’

‘Alexandra Bastedo,’ Beesely informed them without looking up, pronouncing the name carefully. ‘Actress in that 1960s TV show *The Champions*. People often mistook her for that actress when we went out. Something I *may not* ... have denied as strongly as I should have.’

Jane had a look at the photo. ‘My God, she’s beautiful.’ She put a hand on Beesely’s arm. ‘What happened between you?’

‘She told me everything,’ Beesely informed them, still staring at the photo, a pain growing in his chest. ‘Not about Gunter, just that she was sent to spy on me. I offered her asylum here, in this country, thinking she was working for the East Germans, but she insisted that she had to go back. She said the two weeks here with me was the best ... *holiday* she had ever had.’

‘Hang on ... ?’ Johno’s brain had now caught up. ‘She came over to, you know, Mata Hari ... you knocked her up ... and Blotto here -’

‘Is, most likely, my biological son.’

Johnno took a bite. With a mouthful of sandwich he said, ‘Shit, he’s got a lot more hair than you!’

With Beesely focused on Johnno, Jane approached Otto and placed a hand on his arm. ‘That’s great. Where are you staying? You should stay in the guest room here, get to know everyone,’ she rapidly got out.

Otto did not quite know what to say, but smiled back politely.

‘Ricky said it was a long story,’ Beesely firmly interrupted. He motioned for Jane to sit back down.

Otto collected his thoughts. ‘I was raised by Gunter, as his son. I never knew my mother, she died a year after I was born. A man I spoke to one year ago suggested that my ... *father* had killed her in a drunken rage.’

Beesely breathed in hard enough to worry Johnno and Jane. ‘*He* ... killed her?’

‘Definitely. I have confirmed it since.’

‘And *that’s* why you changed his will?’ Beesely asked, now appearing unwell.

Otto suddenly seemed saddened, or disappointed, his expression drifting through many slight changes that Beesely was having a hard time following. He glanced at the faces in the room for several seconds. ‘I changed his will the day I killed him.’ Jane’s enthusiasm for their guest had been swept away. Johnno did not quite know what to make of that, and Ricky shifted uneasily in his seat. Otto added, ‘As he lay sick in the bed I poured water into his mouth and held his mouth and nose closed, looking him in the eye. I told him ... this is for Marianne.’

Silence gripped the table.

Johnno spoke first, still with half a mouthful of sandwich. ‘Nazi bastard deserved everything he got.’

‘Quite,’ Beesely agreed.

Otto turned to Jane. ‘Perhaps some food would be nice.’ He spoke with the confidence of a man used to giving orders and managing people. She glanced to Beesely for confirmation and her boss nodded. They waited until she had left before resuming.

‘Some details are, perhaps, not for her ears,’ Otto suggested to Beesely, who agreed with a nod.

‘So how much was the old bastard worth then?’ Johnno loudly asked.

Beesely scowled at him, but seemed keen to know that as well.

‘Perhaps if I start at the beginning,’ Otto offered. ‘Gunter was an officer in the Wehrmacht towards the end of the war. Not an SS officer or camp guard, or anything of that nature, he was a coward and avoided the Russian front by working as an undercover agent in Switzerland, spying on Allied embassies, and depositing money and works of art for Nazi party members and high ranking officers into Swiss banks.’

‘So he wasn’t a Nazi then?’ Johnno puzzled.

‘Not technically,’ Beesely admitted. ‘But back then any German soldier was called a ‘Nazi’, and Gunter had a Swiss passport as well, so he could have sat out the war instead of volunteering to join up.’

Otto continued, ‘He was from a rich family to start with, inheriting a thirty-five percent share in a Swiss munitions factory when he was just fifteen, bequeathed by his uncle whom he helped each summer. He did not need to work ... or fight. He was already rich towards the end of the war, when his activities depositing money and works of art for Nazi officials flourished. It was not lost on him that many of these officers might not survive the war, so he kept copies of numbered Swiss accounts, branches and details of what was deposited. It is also certain that in 1945, even though he was only twenty, he helped many of his contacts to escape to Switzerland, only to murder them in his safe houses. Their riches fell into his hands.

‘It is fair to say that he *cleaned up*, as you English have it. He may well have killed upwards of fifty people, taking over their bank accounts. Since he opened the accounts, no one at the banks would question him. And he held a genuine Swiss passport.’

‘How’s this Grunter wanker related to you, Boss?’ Johnno queried.

Otto answered the question, ignoring Johnno’s deliberate mispronunciation, ‘Gunter’s older sister travelled to England in 1937. The sister, Guette – a Danish name - changed her first name to Gillian and married Sir Morris’ brother, Robert. They were both killed in a car crash in 1965.’

‘Tenuous bleeding link,’ Johnno pointed out.

Otto turned to address Johnno directly. ‘In the eyes of the law it is still the only link to a living relative.’ Turning back to Beesely he added, ‘Gunter seems to have had a series of mistresses, and

possibly some illegitimate children, who were rumoured to have been killed.'

Beesely ran a hand over his bald scalp. 'All that money in 1945, it must be worth a great deal by now.'

'I told you,' Ricky emphasised as he walked around the table to pour another cup of tea. 'He's the world's richest man, and he's here to give it all to you.'

Beesely studied Otto. 'Is there more?'

'A great deal.'

Jane re-appeared with food, fresh tea and coffee. She attended each of them in turn as this 'board meeting' seemed to pause. She even diligently gave Otto's driver tea and biscuits, before making her excuses and leaving the room.

Otto continued, 'Just after the end of the war, Gunter made several trips into Germany and Austria to recover gold, currency and other valuables. He recovered a great deal of gold and was the keen, how you say, *cave explorer man*. And he was no fool, not keen to spend his money. He invested wisely, trained himself in the stock markets and currency markets, employed researchers to help him pick growth stocks, and he soon hit upon the idea of industrial espionage - he had the contacts and the skills, and he was not afraid to break the law or kill people.'

'The company that he created, an investment bank, soon started to make a lot of money around the world. As soon as anyone started asking questions they were told that this Swiss trading group was acting on behalf of third parties, not themselves, and Swiss banking laws did the rest. Secrecy was assured. He put spies into many companies, large companies. IBM, Ford, the petrol companies, and these sleeper agents were there for thirty to forty years. He used their intelligence data well, but never became greedy. He was always as discreet as a Swiss banker, as we say. Eventually, he came to own several large banks and handled the investments of a great many happy foreign investors. He grew three distinct businesses: the banks, the investment house and an intelligence gathering and security agency.'

'What happened to the intelligence agency?' Johno keenly enquired.

Otto creased one cheek, a sly smile forming.

'Oh ... shit,' Beesely let out, his eyes narrowing. Johno straightened, Ricky grinning to himself with his head lowered.

Otto proudly explained, 'They are all still running, and going from strength to strength. They have been under my direct control for the past six months, under my indirect control with Gunter for the past twenty years. I was formerly head of the banking group, then moved five years ago to help organize the other branches.'

'Oh ... shit,' Beesely repeated.

'Boss?' Johnno asked, now concerned.

Beesely asked, 'This Swiss espionage company ... does it have a name just two characters long?'

Otto smiled. 'There are not many people outside of Switzerland who know that, and most of them are ... well ... not sure what it is, or what it does.'

'Is industrial espionage still its main concern?' Beesely asked, standing and stretching.

'It was, but we have branched out in recent years to private security work in Europe, transporting clients and their valuables discreetly, offering security advice and assistance to companies, casinos, some third world governments. As well as keeping Switzerland as the politicians in Switzerland desire to keep it; quiet, discreet, and free of terrorists and criminals.'

'Unless they can pay,' Beesely suggested.

'Paying criminal clients are not treated in the same way as non-paying criminals,' Otto admitted.

Johnno finished his biscuit. 'So what's it called?' he asked no one in particular.

'K2,' Otto informed him. 'An unofficial name I gave it after climbing the mountain, K2.'

Johnno perked up, himself a former climber in the Army. 'You climb at that standard?'

Ricky shot in, 'Everest in 1991!'

Johnno now saw the 'pinhead Swiss banker type' in a new light, and with a great deal of respect.

Beesely stepped up to him, Johnno raising his head. 'You remember me mentioning a secret organization in Switzerland, one that the Yanks and the Brits could never find anything about, a group that ties naked people to chairs and then sets fire to them?'

Johnno snapped upright, glancing at Otto before turning back to Beesely. 'Them?'

Beesely raised his eyebrows for emphasis and nodded. '*Them*. Sitting having tea and biscuits in our home.'

‘Shit,’ Johno slowly let out. He glanced over his shoulder at Otto’s driver. ‘Hey, Swiss fuck.’ The man blinked. ‘If you’re gunna kill me, stick a banana up my arse, it’ll give the mortician something to laugh about!’

Ricky chuckled.

‘So,’ Beesely asked his visitor as he finally sat back down. ‘Why bother to involve me at all? You seem to have things under control?’

Otto ran a finger right around the four sides of the envelope in front of him. ‘I grew up thinking my father was a Nazi who murdered dozens of people; men, women and children. Then to discover that my grandmother and mother were Jewish, that my supposed father killed my mother ... it was not a good time for me. And then, to discover that my biological father was a real life hero of epic proportions - a decorated Guards officer, hero officer of the SAS, twenty years in British Intelligence and still going strong at eighty. And the more research I conducted, the better I felt about myself. Meeting Richard convinced me that contacting you was the right thing to do. After the story of Kosovo I was convinced, convinced that *you* should head K2, and not me.’

* * *

‘Henry, it’s Kirkpatrick.’

‘You sound ... flustered?’

‘Our English friend and our Swiss friends.’

‘Oh?’

‘Just received an intercept from Bern, Switzerland. Email intercept with all the right keywords. Thank God for the advent of the Internet and the far-sightedness of the NSA!’

‘And?’ Henry quietly nudged.

Kirkpatrick paused. ‘A Bern solicitor being retained to help validate an inheritance.’

Another pause preceded, ‘Impossible.’

‘Apparently not,’ Kirkpatrick insisted.

‘Dear God, if *he* got together with *them*!’

‘We need to take steps ... and quickly.’

Henry’s laboured breathing could be heard down the phone. ‘Do so, cover all the bases, and prepare to withdraw our exposed assets.’

Beesely's eyes widened. 'Head up K2? Me!'

Otto shrugged slightly. 'Yes, why not. You are the best qualified, and it needs a re-structuring. It needs –'

'Direction,' Beesely cut in, staring out of focus and thinking. 'It needs... a purpose.'

Otto formed a thin smile. 'Yes, it needs direction and purpose. Why have power and money if it does not do anything... *constructive?*'

'MI6 would have kittens,' Beesely stated, glancing at Ricky.

Ricky grinned and lifted his eyebrows in emphasis. 'Wait till they discover the size of K2!'

'Oh?' Beesely asked, a question in his look.

Ricky added, 'Two thousand staff in twenty countries, plus contracted staff. About four hundred front line agents.'

'Jesus,' Beesely let out. 'They won't just be pissed off at me, they'll be... *somewhat concerned!*'

'Screw 'em, Boss. They tried to screw you over. And they left Johno up the creek in Kosovo.'

'We knew the risk,' Johno stated.

'Yeah,' Ricky agreed. 'But there's a *shit load* you don't know.' Ricky turned to Beesely for permission to continue. Beesely sighed and sat back. A wave of his hand told Ricky to go ahead. 'Sir Morris spent close to a million squids of his own money to get you out. He offered me money, which I *did not* take! Before Kosovo I didn't know who you were, Johno, I just knew that Sir Morris was turning hell inside out to organize a rescue.

'He was *officially* ordered not to, on threat of prison. Or worse. So he got a crew together. They helped me to the border, I had a guide to your last known position - poor fellow getting blown away just as we reached you - then Sir Morris offered the Yanks top secret info about MI6 activities in Saudi Arms deals, stuff they wanted to know. The Yanks only then agreed to fly you out. If he got caught he could have faced life in prison or the death penalty for treason.

'He paid for that plane out of Italy, and your hospital bills. He even put a gun to the head of an Army communications officer to get your last known position. And I mean, gun to the head, literally

- scared the *Rupert* to death. There was an enquiry an' all afterwards. Fortunately, Sir Morris knew where the bodies were buried. He told head boy cock-sucker in the Foreign Office that he would talk if he got charged.'

Johnno took it in, thinking, before addressing Beesely. 'You felt guilty about sending me into Kosovo?'

'Not quite,' Ricky suggested with a sigh. 'Perhaps someone should tell the poor fool. Now ... seems like a good time.'

Johnno turned his head. 'Tell me what, pineapple face?'

'Shall I?' Otto offered.

'Did Richard tell you?' Beesely angrily demanded.

'No. K2 is ... very efficient,' Otto smugly replied.

'Tell me what?' Johnno repeated, being ignored.

Beesely breathed in slowly as he considered the face of his newfound son. 'This is going to be a turning point, for many things and many people.' He lowered his head and sighed. 'Today will be the last day as we were.' He faced Otto. 'Go ahead then, let's see what you think you know,' he prompted without any hint of malice.

Otto turned squarely to Johnno. 'Sir Morris went to so much trouble to get you out of Kosovo ... because you are his illegitimate son, my half-brother.' It took a while to sink in, Ricky and Otto watching Johnno's reaction. Or lack of it.

Johnno focused on Beesely, his brow slowly creasing. 'You ... you're my ... real father?' Beesely nodded, appearing tired. Johnno looked almost studious as he continued to think. 'Well,' he sighed with a resigned look, 'that explains a hell of lot. I used to think I had a guardian angel, back in the early days in the Army. I should have been court-martialled twice -'

'Three ... times,' Beesely slipped in.

Johnno thought back. 'Three times? So that was *you* ... getting me off?' Beesely gave him a quick nod. 'And that strange NAAFI raffle I won?' Johnno probed. Again his employer nodded. He took a big breath. 'Always wondered why you kept me on, all the hassle I gave you.'

'Give ... me. Hassle you *give* me,' Beesely quietly, but firmly corrected.

Johnno rubbed his moustache. 'Thirty grand a year to be your driver when you hardly go out - should have figured that one.' He stared out of focus for a moment. 'Well ... if it's not a stupid

question, why didn't you say anything before?' He focused on his father. 'I'm not a frigging kid.'

Beesely turned to Otto to answer. Johnno's new half-brother began, 'Because you would have been a target, had anyone known your connection to a senior manager in MI6.' He turned back to Beesely for confirmation, acknowledged by a brief smile.

Johnno remained studious. 'So my mum Barbara and you ... shit!' He screwed up his face. 'Yuk! And that wanker of a step-dad I had -'

'Yuk?' Beesely repeated.

Otto keenly cut in, 'That man used to beat you and your mother, so Sir Morris had him jailed on the made-up charges. When he was out of jail -'

'Yuk?' Beesely quietly repeated, being ignored.

'I decked the wanker,' Johnno finished, focused on no one in particular. 'I was big enough then.' He turned to Beesely. 'And that money my mother got from some dead relative?'

'Yes,' Otto confirmed. 'It was Beesely. He wanted you to go to college, but you joined the Army instead.'

'College!' Ricky laughed.

'Piss off!' Johnno retorted, still deep in thought.

Beesely wasn't quite sure what he had expected after all these years; tears, big hugs, lots of shouting about 'lost years'. He should have known better.

Johnno addressed Otto, but pointed a finger at Beesely. 'So, when *he* finally croaks, how much do I get?'

Ricky laughed so loud that Jane came back in. Even Beesely began to laugh and Otto joined in.

'What?' Johnno asked, looking from face to face and reaching for a sandwich.

5

Half an hour later, and Johnno and Otto were stood talking about climbing, a little awkward in quite how to deal with each other. Johnno worked hard on suppressing his natural urge to take the piss out of this 'suited pin head', but was starting to develop a great deal of respect for Otto's climbing achievements. Not to mention the cross-country skiing, the downhill skiing, ski jumping, competition shooting, canoeing...

Beesely stood with Ricky at the other end of the room, teacup and saucer in Beesely's hands, mug in Ricky's. Beesely asked, 'Have you been to command central in Switzerland?'

Ricky's expression suggested it was an interesting place. 'Big underground office beneath an old castle on a lake,' he whispered.

'Castle?' Beesely repeated. 'Is there a cave with a bald fellow stroking a white cat? Goes by the name of Doctor No?'

Ricky laughed. 'There is a cave, the whole damn command centre is underground.'

'Is it linked to Swiss Military Intelligence, the UNA?'

Ricky edged closer. 'I think these boys at K2 *own* the UNA!'

Beesely nodded to himself as he thought. 'Any mention of P-26?'

'What's that?' Ricky whispered.

'Never mind.' He shot a quick glance toward Otto. 'What else have you seen?'

'The castle is a hotel type place with about ten, fifteen palatial guest rooms, like a five star retreat in the country. There're rooms for you, Johnno and Jane ... plus a fleet of Range Rovers just to make you feel at home.'

Beesely raised his eyebrows, tipped his head forwards and asked a silent question.

Ricky grinned. 'Likes to plan ahead, does our Mister Otto. All the guards use old MP5s and Browning pistols so that Johnno will feel at home.'

'You trust him?' Beesely pressed, glancing again at Otto.

'As much as you and Johnno,' Ricky answered. 'The thing to keep in mind, is that if *you* don't inherit the bank and K2, Otto is out of a job, state steps in. Add to the fact that Marianne was Jewish, and poor old Otto is on a knife-edge - don't know how the fucker sleeps at night. He didn't need to come here and chat nicely, this guy could snap his fingers and make you lot do whatever he wanted. The power this guy has makes MI6 look like a bunch of frigging girl guides; two thousand staff, offices all over Europe. Frightening, some of the things he can *arrange*.'

Beesely tipped his head. 'Such as?'

Ricky leant in closer. 'He lifted all the old MI6 files relating to you. They're in the fucking car.'

Beesely brightened. 'Ah, now that would be interesting reading.'

Ricky grinned. 'Thought so.'

Beesely glanced over at his two boys. Whispering, he enquired, 'What do you think motivates him?'

'He wants to be a spymaster. Can't blame him, we all need a hobby, and it beats being a desk-jockey in some sterile fucking bank. And it seems that this Gunter wanker treated him badly, no hugs at bedtime. Kid grew up needing to prove something, now he's got the chance. And it's *you* he wants to prove it to.'

Beesely nodded to himself, facing Otto. He asked, 'Seen anything of our good friend General Rose lately?'

'If I did I'd deck the winker. Gave me the cold shoulder ten years ago – only offered me the shitty missions that no one else would touch.'

'Because you wouldn't spy on me,' Beesely put in, sighing.

'He never did trust you.'

Beesely led Ricky by the arm back to the table. 'Gentlemen, your seats please. Jane, come sit by me. No matter what we discuss from now on, I want you to be a part of things.' They all sat, and they all deferred leadership to Beesely. Beesely took a breath. 'To business. Otto, I presume a man of your abilities has a plan he is working to, some ... objectives?'

'I have, yes,' Otto answered, glancing from face to face as Jane made ready her pad, ready to take notes. 'But they are open to debate and to ... guidance. You, sir, are infinitely more experienced than I in running intelligence operations. John, is more experienced in special operations of a military nature.'

'John-oh,' Johnno corrected.

Otto glanced at him. 'Of course, John-oh.'

Beesely took the pad and pen from Jane. 'Well, let's hear the main points, and we can kick the ideas around from there.'

Otto cleared his throat, the first sign all night of any nerves in this company. 'The first objective is to review current structures and operations on a macro scale, and to define some directions. I would suggest that the principal aim is to continue to make money, to facilitate the other operations that we may desire to be involved with.'

'Yes, of course,' Beesely commended. 'Need to oil the wheels. Does K2 make a profit from its own activities?'

‘No, only around twenty five percent of costs are met directly. The rest are met indirectly by the investment arms; stocks and shares, patents, direct dividends.’

‘And the investment arm benefits greatly from intelligence garnered by K2 operatives and sleepers?’ Otto nodded. Beesely seemed deep in thought for a moment, easing back. ‘Do any of those operations take money away from the needy? Does anyone get hurt?’

‘Not typically, certainly less so in recent years. If you mean to ask - are shareholders adversely affected when we benefit - then only to a small degree. It is mostly institutional size investors that may lose money to us. Naturally, if we deliberately bankrupted a company for some benefit ... then the staff and investors would be hurt.’

‘Would *we* do that?’ Beesely gingerly enquired.

‘Such a move would be high profile, which is not our style. There would have to be a special reason for it,’ Otto explained.

Beesely interlaced his fingers, leaning forwards and resting his weight on his forearms. ‘Such as a factory selling replica guns that they *know* can easily be turned into real ones on British streets?’

Otto seemed a little confused. ‘I am not sure...’

Beesely helped him out. ‘There’s a specific factory in the Czech Republic that I’m thinking about, read about just the other day in The Times, British Government not too happy.’

Otto pulled a large phone from inside his jacket.

Johnno snorted, ‘Are those frigging things supposed to be getting smaller? Very nineteen nineties! Got a fucking filofax as well?’

Ricky tapped Johnno’s arm. ‘Advanced satellite phone, GPS, homing signal, makes the tea...’

‘Handy,’ Johnno offered, deciding to shut up.

Otto pressed a button and began to talk without waiting. ‘Czech company ... makes replica firearms ... has recently been criticized by the British Government.’ He paused, listened, then held the phone away from his ear. ‘There are three such factories.’ He raised the phone to his ear once more and listened for a minute. ‘One is owned by a Chinese parent company ... one is struggling financially... the last is the one being criticized, name of GNG, owned by a German businessman.’ He put the phone to his ear

again. 'I see. He also has a stake in the second factory.' Otto held the phone down. 'How would *you* ... wish us to proceed?'

Beesely leant forwards slightly. 'How would *you* normally handle this, if your objective was to stop the flow of these guns around Europe?'

Otto considered the scenario. 'I would ... buy a majority stake in each company, discreetly through several proxy holdings, then insist that the gun's design be altered -'

Beesely straightened. 'Which would all take many months. There's nothing wrong with your approach, commendably professional, stealthy and measured - as I would expect. But these guns are ending up in Manchester slums every day. A few more months means a few more lives lost.'

'How would *you* wish us to proceed?' Otto repeated.

'The factory owned by the Chinese -' Beesely began.

'Burn the frigging thing down!' Ricky suggested.

'What I was going to say,' Beesely explained, a reproachful glance toward Ricky, 'was to burn down all three at the same time, making them all look like insurance claims. The Chinese we do not like, the struggling factory is a prime case for arson, and this German fella should know better than to dabble in such matters.'

'So burn them!' Johnno recommended.

'I second that,' Ricky offered with a smirk.

Beesely raised his arm, 'I vote in favour of the motion put forward by the board.'

Otto lifted the phone back to his ear. 'Burn all three factories on the same night, making it appear as if deliberate arson, implicating the German businessman owner for his two.'

'May as well make it all three,' Beesely suggested with a cheeky grin.

Otto shrugged his shoulders. Into the phone he ordered, 'Make all three look as if it were the same person. Get back to me tomorrow with a detailed plan, to be executed the day after.'

'Just like that?' Johnno asked. 'Sweet.'

'Just like that,' Ricky repeated with a confident smile.

Otto hung up, looking Beesely directly in the eye. 'Are you testing me, or testing K2?'

Beesely leant forwards. 'A bit of both, my lad. How better to get to know you and your outfit's capabilities than some practical work, eh?'

Otto considered Beesely's words. 'Are we, then, to define K2 as an instrument of political good in Europe?'

Beesely offered two open palms. 'Can you think of a better use for it? It's not like you need a 'stay behind' army any more, no threat from the Russians these days!'

'Stay behind army?' Johnno queried. 'What the fuck's that? An Army that stays in bed all day?'

'Something you should know, my boy. MI6 and the SAS trained them, at least they used to up until the nineties.'

'I had a Swiss guy embedded with my squadron for five weeks in 1981,' Ricky informed the group. 'Not up to much.'

'No, they've never fired a shot in anger,' Beesely pointed out. He explained to Johnno, 'Following the Second World War the Swiss set up a small 'resistance force', based on British SOE operations there during the war. In fact, I recall one British SOE instructor retiring there.'

'To do what?' Johnno enquired.

'Create potential resistance fighters,' Beesely explained. 'Pop up after the Russians invade and blow up bridges.'

'Like Gladio in Italy?' Ricky asked.

Beesely smiled. 'Guess *you* actually read a book once in a while.' As the words trailed off he shot a look at Johnno, who did not notice. Now he made direct eye contact with Otto. 'Did K2 evolve from your P-26 unit, underground resistance army on paper?'

'Let me pronounce this correctly,' Otto began. 'You may think that, I cannot comment.'

Beesely smiled and corrected him. '*You may think that, I could not possibly comment.*'

Otto gave a small bow. 'In part. K2 did not evolve directly from these old men. As you say ... army on paper. K2 evolved from Gunter's ... er ... paranoid?'

'*Paranoia*,' Beesely corrected.

Otto considered his father carefully for a moment, seemed to come to a decision then opened his case. He produced three phones of the same style as his, each having been labelled in advance. He slid one across the table to Beesely. 'Press the green button and you will be instantly talking with a senior assistant in operations. You can ask questions of a research nature, instigate studies or obtain the information on most any subject, person or

business. You can obtain the private phone numbers of any individual, including Presidents and movie stars. You can also order actions of almost any nature. The signal is encoded beyond the reach of any agency, privacy is assured.'

Beesely studied it through his bifocals. 'This one has bigger buttons than the others.'

'Yes –' Otto began.

'Because ya a blind old git,' Johno suggested.

'Thanks for that,' Beesely replied without detracting from his study of the phone.

Otto handed Johno a phone, but held on to it. 'Please ... do not abuse this.'

Beesely squinted at Otto over the top of his glasses then turned to Johno. 'Johno, it's business use ... or we *will* have a problem.'

'OK, OK. Keep your panties on.'

Otto handed one to Jane, for which she thanked him as if receiving a Christmas present. 'If you are ever in danger, press the red button and hold for a few seconds. It will send your exact position to operations. We can find you quickly.'

Beesely had been listening to the tone of that last sentence with great interest. Did Otto know about Jane? Probably. 'Jane, you were not in the room when Otto revealed a few *interesting* details to us.'

'Oh?' she said, genuinely interested in everything happening.

'Otto is my biological son, as you heard earlier, but so is Johno.'

She seemed shocked, glancing from one face to another. With a puzzled look she finally asked, 'So ... how did that happen?'

'Do you want me to show you some pictures?' Johno offered.

'No, not that ... I mean –'

'It was the sixties,' Beesely offered by way of excuse. 'I was rushing around London playing secret agent, believing that I could do just about anything and everything. Anyway, I was not as careful as I should have been, and sex was a great antidote to stress in the face of imminent death.'

'Must have been very stressful,' Johno quipped without looking up.

Beesely took a deep breath, taking hold of Jane's hand. 'Jane, I have an apology to make, and today seems to be the day to make it. Today seems to be the turning point I had always believed I

would avoid. I always believed you would all read my will and ... understand.' He took in their faces. 'Cowardly, perhaps, but simpler ... for all your sakes.' He faced her and announced, 'Jane, I am also *your* father.'

6

Johno looked up, and stared across at Jane. 'For fuck's sake,' he muttered. 'Anyone checked that stray cat? She had a litter last year!'

Otto had not reacted, he already knew. Ricky was perplexed, and Jane sat quietly stunned.

Beesely held her hand, ignoring Johno. 'I'm sorry for not having told you before –'

'Didn't apologise to me,' Johno muttered, loud enough for them to hear.

Beesely ignored him. He continued, in a soft voice, 'Because it would have made you a target for kidnap and blackmail. If people thought that you were just a secretary then you would have been safe, and Johno just a driver in the same fashion.'

'I can look after myself!' Johno angrily pointed out.

'That's not the point!' Beesely rounded on him. 'It would have made you a target. I was involved in stuff that none of you know about. Very dangerous stuff, pissing off just about everyone from the CIA to the KGB.' He took a breath. 'Let's just leave it at that for now.'

He turned back to Jane and stroked her decidedly cold hands. 'I have always looked after you as if you were my own, so I don't think things would have been any different between us if you had known.' He brightened. 'And besides, who else would give you a job?'

She seemed mildly offended. 'My typing is not that bad.'

'It's legendary in intelligence circles,' Beesely pointed out with a pained expression. 'And not for its accuracy.' She gave him an embarrassed look before lowering her head. 'My bosses in the Circus used to mark it with a red pen and send it back, points out of ten. The only benefit came when the KGB were intercepting my mail. They had trouble translating it, thinking the misspellings were some sort of code.' He fought back a smile. 'They spent months, apparently, trying to decipher it.'

Ricky used all his strength not to laugh out loud.

Jane forced back a tear, not being the most composed person at the best of times. 'I often wondered why you kept me around. Everyone else was always telling me how useless I was.'

Johnno had wandered around to where the sandwiches were. Now he stood behind her and placed a hand on her shoulder. 'You make a great cuppa. And in the summer you can chill my beer just by holding the can.'

Otto placed a hand on her arm. 'I have been looking forward to getting to know my family. I am very glad that you are my half-sister.'

She lifted her head, focusing on Johnno. 'See, *he* appreciates me!'

'What?' Johnno protested with a mouth full of sandwich. 'I said you make a great cuppa, stropky tart.'

Beesely turned back to Otto. 'The apple fell far from the tree with that one.' They both watched Johnno as he crammed more food onto his plate than it had been designed for.

'Yeah, well the tree dropped its seed, pulled up its roots and pissed off to another orchard,' Johnno pointed out.

Beesely had to concede, 'Fair point.' He turned back to Jane. 'Will you be alright?'

She sat hunched, almost crying. 'What happens to me now?'

Otto jumped in and answered with, 'Now you will be protected, looked after in every way. You will want for nothing - houses, cars, money, food - just tell me what you need. You will not have to worry again.'

Beesely was quietly taken aback as the authority was temporarily stripped away from him, but also delighted to see that Otto purported to be so protective towards her.

Otto turned to Ricky. 'If you can go outside, I will send for the others.' Ricky, and Otto's driver, stood and stepped outside.

'Others?' Beesely nervously enquired.

'My staff,' Otto reassured him, a hint of a smile. 'If you would please step outside for a moment,' he formally requested. Facing Jane he said, 'Please put on a coat, we may be some time.'

Again Beesely felt odd that someone else was looking out for Jane; for the past forty years that had been his job. Otto made a call, and by time they reached the gate several cars were coming down the lane, followed by the headlights of many other vehicles.

‘Billy Smarts’ Circus?’ Johno asked. ‘Tent on the lawn?’

The first vehicle arrived, a Range Rover.

‘For you, Johno.’ Otto gestured him towards it.

‘Not such a bad wanker after all,’ Johno muttered as he walked over to it, finding it brand new and customised, top of the range.

‘And for Jane,’ Otto said as he gestured. Through the gate trundled a bright yellow Ford KA.

Beesely smiled and turned to her. ‘That must be for you!’ he shouted over the noise building up outside his house.

Jane was delighted; the right colour, small and nippy, and she had always wanted one of these. She gave Otto a big hug from within a padded coat that appeared to be three sizes too big for her before gingerly sitting inside.

A Rolls Royce Silver Ghost, 1907, came next, a beautiful antique of a car that Beesely stood admiring. He gestured off to one side, smiling at Otto as the classic car was now parked up at the edge of the grass. Otto had followed Beesely to the ‘Roller’, halting the rest of the vehicles with a hand, the drivers of the prior vehicles now stood in a neat line by the main door to the house.

‘Collector’s piece,’ Beesely stated through the open door. ‘Lovingly restored.’

Otto explained, ‘Imported from a collector in southern France, where it was used for several movies. All the details are in a ... how you say ... *scrap book*, in the rear with a certificate of provenance.’

Beesely beamed as he clambered out, circling the car. ‘You know how to impress, my boy.’ He closed the door and turned to the line of vehicles in the lane. ‘And they are?’

‘Security and operations,’ Otto stated, beckoning them in. ‘This house is not secure. When you or the others are in residence there will be the round-of-the-clock security, cameras, lights and dogs.’

Beesely watched the procession with some concern; Otto had brought a small army.

‘Shall we go back inside, sir?’

Several Range Rovers, and two vans, halted on the gravel as Otto led Beesely back to the house. Back inside, Otto opened his briefcase as Beesely watched the commotion through the dinning room window.

‘For you.’ Otto handed Beesely a Swiss diplomatic passport, complete with suitable photograph and signature, a worryingly neat piece of forgery.

‘My diplomatic skills are a little rusty,’ Beesely joked as he thumbed through the red booklet.

‘This property is now registered by the Swiss Diplomatic Corps as an official residence,’ Otto informed him as Johno wandered back in. ‘That means-’

Beesely cut in, ‘That the police and security services could not enter, even with a warrant, if they see me running naked round the house with a surface-air-missile on my shoulder.’

‘Who’d want to come in with you naked!’ Johno quipped as Otto handed him a passport. ‘So what can I do with this?’

‘Clobber whomsoever you like. With impunity!’ Beesely pointed out.

Johno’s eyes widened. ‘Sweet.’

‘Worst the police could do is deport you to Switzerland,’ Beesely added, thumbing through his.

Johno stuffed the passport inside his jacket pocket as Jane accepted hers.

Otto explained to them, ‘There will be a plaque on the front gate and several signs around the fences. This house is now off limits to British police and intelligence services. And I hold full Assistant Ambassador status.’

Beesely looked up sharply. ‘You do?’

Otto smiled, barely visible. ‘We work closely with the Swiss Government.’

‘Get out of jail cards all around,’ Johno announced to no one in particular, grabbing another sandwich.

‘May my people use your spare rooms and the cottage?’

Beesely nodded his agreement. ‘The cottage is a good idea, but it needs work –’

‘Decorators and builders will arrive tomorrow.’

Beesely tipped his head. ‘Why...?’

‘To make the cottage suitable, to install a fence, to replace the windows in this house and to install state-of-the-art security systems.’

‘Johno is good with those,’ Beesely pointed out.

‘Yes, I am aware. When we are set up, Johno can inspect and test the systems.’ He took a file from his case and handed it to

Johno. It held detailed plans, very detailed plans; drawings, sketches and technical specifications.

Johno sat down with his sandwiches, another mug of tea and began to read, occasionally mumbling to himself. Headlights flashed outside, gravel crunched under tyres, doors slammed and dogs barked as Ricky slipped away on a job for Otto.

* * *

Johno bumped into Beesely coming out of the toilet around 2am. Beesely stood ready to head back to his room when Johno quietly asked, 'Do you think this is all on the level?'

Beesely turned to him. 'I think ... I think that if we considered this some giant trap then we are deluding ourselves as to our worth to the world, and to our potential enemies. With me at the head of K2 we most certainly are in *clear and present danger*, as they say. Take away K2 and rewind a few hours, and you and I, boy, are not worth two bent pennies to anyone. No one would go to this much trouble to screw with us, we're yesterdays' news. Seems like life has dealt us four aces on our last hand of the night. Anyway, starting tomorrow I'm going to test our new best friend to destruction. And have some fun doing it! First, I'll test his Jewish heritage, something I know a great deal about. If he isn't on the level he'll have a heart attack before noon with what I've got planned.'

Johno nodded his acceptance of that idea, heading off back to bed, Beesely unhappily noting his Simpson's shorts and a t-shirt that announced: 'Does not play well with other children.'

Fun and games

1

James Kirkpatrick, CIA, could hardly believe what he was hearing. He listened harder to the call, his eyes narrowing. ‘Say again.’

‘Observation is now limited on primary target. The house now has continuous patrols, dogs, motion sensors and laser movement kit. Plus the guards are armed and they wander outside the fixed perimeter.’

‘Have you been compromised?’

‘Negative.’

‘Withdraw. Stateside.’

‘Affirmative.’

Kirkpatrick eased back, deep into his chair, frowning hard. ‘What the hell is going on over there?’ He raised the phone. ‘I want a fresh assessment made of K2’s defensive and offensive capabilities, staff and equipment. Fast as you can, please.’

* * *

Otto had spent the night in the guest room. The previous evening he had confessed to not needing much sleep, which was just as well, because Johnno’s intermittent snoring in the next room had kept him awake. The toilet had been flushed many times during the night, the old cistern taking ten noisy minutes to fill back up. Dawn saw the arrival of several wood pigeons on the branch outside Otto’s window, cooing away and leaving him looking a little haggard at breakfast. His suit was immaculate, but his eyes betrayed the fatigue.

He said nothing of the fact that he heard Johnno scream out during the night, or Jane sobbing. He would also say nothing of the fact that he thought he heard Johnno sobbing.

Otto and Beesely had chatted conspiratorially next to the fireplace the previous evening, working their way through

several glasses of wine and finishing off with the best malt whisky. Johnno had pestered, poked, prodded and generally questioned at length the new security staff, testing most of the equipment and breaking just a few small items. Now he was having a well-deserved lie-in.

Jane now made Otto and Beesely breakfast, having already insisted the passing guards have a toasted muffin each. Their dogs were grateful.

Otto reached over the small kitchen table and helped himself to more of Jane's 'special' scrambled eggs, with potato wedges and tomatoes in. He noticed Beesely's gaze following his movements. Checking over his shoulder, Otto whispered, 'It is good, no?'

Beesely seemed unconvinced about Jane's cooking and stuck to toast. 'Should be a busy day then, plenty of people to impress and some to upset. If it is not a rude question, just how much *are* we worth?'

Otto produced a wallet and removed from it a neatly folded piece of paper.

'There are way too many zeros on there for me to understand, and it's in European notation.' Beesely grabbed a pen, slicing off groups of three zeros at a time. He swallowed. 'That is a lot of money.'

'More than the British Government spends on its military in a year.'

Beesely seemed concerned. 'Which would make us a target for those capable of taking it away from us.'

Otto confidently smiled and shook his head. 'First, only a handful of people know this detail. Second, there are triple redundant safety measures in place ... and the Swiss Government would step in if they suspected foul play. I give you the example: if you or I are killed, automatically many millions are paid to three independent agencies in three separate countries, who will investigate with aggression and vigour. If they suspect foul play, a further sum of money is transferred to deal with those they suspect. The people who work for me know that killing me would achieve nothing for them.'

‘As thorough as a Swiss banker,’ Beesely commended, accepting more tea from Jane. He told her, ‘Wake up Boy Wonder in an hour, visitors this afternoon.’

‘I have a helicopter at your disposal,’ Otto suddenly announced.

‘My boy, first rule of negotiation, let them come to you. Keep the high ground, do not go cap-in-hand.’ Beesely could see that Otto did not quite understand. ‘Watch and learn, my boy. Watch ... and learn.’

2

Mossad, Israeli Secret Service, had been surprised by the call; concerned that Beesely had called their UK Section Head directly. The invitation had been cryptic, but urgent: Beesely had some vital intelligence for them, and a helicopter stood waiting at London Docklands Airport.

Mr. Elle Rosen, the forty-eight year old Section Head, quickly investigated Beesely. A call to ‘the institute’, Tel Aviv, had surprised him: he was to go ahead and meet with Beesely, no further explanation given. Now, the low profile, and generally unknown Section Head – a fronting as a mortgage broker, stepped down from a K2 helicopter on Broadlands’ lawn with his assistant after a twenty-minute flight from East London. As the helicopter disappeared over the lake, scattering the ducks and swans, Otto greeted Elle in poor, but appreciated Hebrew.

‘German?’ Elle puzzled.

‘Swiss Jew,’ Otto replied. ‘Not practising.’

Elle shrugged his shoulders and made a face.

Beesely shook his hand. ‘Do come in, refreshments await us.’

As Elle followed Beesely towards the house he carefully noted the guards, the dogs and the building work, being stopped at the edge of the grass by his assistant pointing out a sensor half buried in the lawn; it was, after all, Israeli manufactured. They exchanged looks as they caught up.

‘You take your security seriously,’ Elle casually commented as they stepped into the house, a London-British accent with a little New York American mixed in.

‘I take many things way too seriously,’ Beesely replied without stopping or looking around.

After five minutes of obligatory pleasantries around the oak table they finally sat, adjusted seats and squared up to each other.

‘I’ve been ... working with the CIA quite closely of late,’ Beesely began, stirring his tea.

The Israelis again glanced at each other. ‘Working with them ... or for them?’ Elle enigmatically probed, the faintest hint of a grin evident.

Beesely offered Elle a look of candid, mock surprise. ‘I’m sure I have no idea what you mean.’ Otto was not following. ‘Anyway, as you are probably aware –’ which he knew they weren’t. ‘- I have recently become the head of a private security agency, headquartered in ... Zug, Switzerland.’

Elle appeared as if he might say something before checking himself, a glance at Otto. His assistant stiffened.

Beesely continued, ‘You have probably had your suspicions for some time.’

Elle simply acknowledged with an undetermined nod.

‘Yes ... not much slips past your outfit.’ Beesely stirred his tea. ‘Anyway, I am not as young as I used to be, and I wish to change the way we do things, become more *pro-active* as the Americans like to say. My organization has roughly two thousand staff –’

‘What?’ Elle questioned.

Beesely made firm eye contact. ‘Guess it’s grown a bit since you last checked up on us.’ Lowering his gaze again to his teaspoon, he continued, ‘But many of those are researchers, not front line agents, as you can imagine.’ The guests stared back. ‘Anyway, I have accumulated a substantial amount of money over the years, stashed it away in Swiss banks, but now ... now I want to do more with it. And that’s where you chaps come in. I feel that I can help you.’

‘Help us how?’

Beesely turned his head towards Otto, who produced a document without taking his gaze off Elle. He handed it over. Beesely continued, 'We've set up a Swiss bank account for you, untraceable, and one that you can use for operations that your government and legislators, shall we say, *may not* get to know about.'

Elle was puzzled, a heavy crease forming across his forehead. He put a finger on the sum and displayed the detail to his assistant.

Beesely added, 'It's more than we made available to the Americans, of course. Did not want them asking too many questions. You gentlemen are far more discreet about stuff like this.'

Elle nodded, still re-reading the page.

'Now, gentlemen, there are a few little provisos that come with this piece of paper.' Beesely slid it back. 'Things that you could do to help little old me. After all, you're the professionals, I'm just the keen amateur. First of all, we're based in Switzerland. Any operations by your good selves inside our borders and we would be ... most disappointing.'

Elle appeared as if he was about to object, but Beesely raised a hand.

'Naturally, if there is some operation that needs to be conducted on Swiss soil then we'll do it for you - we have agents in every walk of life inside our borders. I am afraid I must insist, gentlemen. If you want our kind co-operation then you *must not* operate inside our borders. If you want the Iranian Embassy in Switzerland bugged, then we will do it for you. *We* ... won't get caught.'

Elle's eyes slowly widened at the cheek of that statement.

'Do it for us?' his assistant repeated.

Beesely tried to hide his amusement. 'Yes, do it for you. We are very, very efficient at what we do. Especially on our own patch.' He pushed the paper back across the table. 'And ... we would have the odd reciprocal favour to ask. Someone followed there, killed here -'

'Killed?' Elle's assistant queried.

‘We do not piss about,’ Beesely sternly pointed out. ‘If you gentlemen are tailing an Arab suspect and he ducks across our borders, we’ll deliver him to Tel Aviv for you, dead or alive.’

‘I’m just gunna feed the fucking mutts,’ broke the tension as Johnno stepped out of the front door.

Beesely forced a smile. ‘My gardener. Now, you must stay for some food and some fishing.’

‘Fishing?’ Elle puzzled.

‘Yes, in the lake, all set up for you. Chopper won’t be back for almost forty-five minutes, our American friends popping down.’

Elle tilted his head. ‘CIA?’

‘Yes, you probably know them.’

After a few nibbles, some tea and pleasantries, Beesely took Elle for a long one-on-one session, chatting as they strolled around the house grounds, Elle’s assistants sitting by the lake and ‘fishing’.

* * *

‘Ah, I wonder if you can help me,’ Beesely said into his mobile. ‘I am trying to reach the director of fundraising for your charity. That’s yourself? Good. I am an anonymous benefactor with ten million pounds about to wing its way to you by electronic transfer from my Swiss bank account ... yes ... you’re welcome.’

‘Well, here’s the thing. My dear lady wife died from breast cancer ... thanks ... and she had this idea before she left us. I want you to organize something for me for tomorrow in central London. I shall release the funds today on an agreement between us. Fine, OK, this is what I would like you to organize for me...’

Beesely had given Otto a firm directive, one that involved large sums of money, and would stretch over many years. It had been codenamed ‘Operation Clean-up’ and was due to start soon.

He had made numerous phone calls to perplexed individuals; a few senior police officers he knew, a few retired SAS officers

and some ‘unpleasant operators’ as he had described them to Otto. Beesely would be buying guns, illegal street guns.

* * *

In Bern, Switzerland, The Zimbabwean Ambassador stood confused. So did his staff. Their two shiny black limousines had been securely stored overnight in the spacious embassy garage as usual. But today was different. Today they were ... pink. Neatly and expertly re-sprayed. Pink.

They walked around the vehicles. No paint spots were visible on the glass, the chrome work or the floor. The paint gleamed, dry and shiny, a perfect gloss finish, diligently tested by the Ambassador himself. They stood and stared, already late for their meeting.

At Broadlands, Beesely held an A4 colour computer image, freshly printed off, roaring with laughter. Otto did not understand what this use of K2 resources actually proved.

3

The London CIA Deputy Section Chief, Hamilton Burke Junior, followed his Israeli colleagues flight-plan to Broadlands, the same helicopter. He too had checked out Beesely, and he too had been told to attend the meeting. As he landed, he could not have missed the three men sat by the side of the lake, fishing.

His assistant tapped his arm and spoke into the headset as they unbuckled. ‘That’s the new Israeli Section Head for the UK.’ They exchanged glances.

‘The guy looks pretty fucking relaxed. He a regular visitor?’

Beesely stood waiting on the gravel, a direct path toward him keeping the Americans away from talking to the Israelis. He waved to them as they cleared the rotor blades, the two men finally straightened up. ‘So nice of you to pop down.’

Burke wore a casual jacket over a polo t-shirt, covering a barrel chest, a neck the same girth as his head. With crew cut grey hair, he appeared to Beesely to be in his fifties. The

Americans glanced at the Israelis as the Israelis watched the Americans walking into the house.

‘You do business with the Israelis,’ Burke noted, very matter of fact, as they assembled around the table. The used cups had been deliberately left, giving the impression of a long prior meeting.

Jane stepped in, Beesely saying to her, ‘Shall we clear this lot away and start afresh?’ He gestured firmly for the two Americans to sit down. ‘Please, gentlemen, have a seat.’ Then, as an afterthought, ‘Sorry, you were saying something about the Israelis? Like the fishing, gets them away from London.’

‘Sure,’ Burke agreed, his eyes taking in as much detail of the room as he could find. ‘Love to fish myself,’ he announced whilst still checking out the room, managing to make it sound his least favourite activity, his accent now getting broader and heading west.

‘Excellent!’ Beesely boomed with a broad smile. ‘You’ll have to try the lake after the Israelis head back.’

The helicopter roared past the house.

Beesely turned to Otto with a surprised look. ‘Have they gone?’

Otto nodded.

‘And left the fishing gear on the lake?’

Otto again nodded.

‘Bloody typical! Not the most diplomatic of people.’

‘That’s for sure,’ Burke blurted out, immediately regretting it.

‘As friendly as waiters in a Tel Aviv hotel,’ Beesely joked. They all laughed, Burke’s laughter forced. Beesely continued avoiding eye contact with his guests as Jane brought out tea, plus coffee for the Americans in the exact flavours and measures of milk and sugar as the guests favoured. It was not missed on them and they exchanged uneasy glances.

Burke sipped his coffee, the exact Colombian blend he had brought with him to the UK. It remained hard to find outside of South America. ‘So, how’s Dame Helen working out for the Circus? If ... you’re still in the loop?’

Otto tapped Beesely's arm, Beesely ignoring the dig from Burke. 'She wants to make an appointment and pop down. Today if possible,' he lied.

'What is this, open house day?' Beesely feigned.

Otto continued lying, 'She wants us to have another crack at that Russian problem.'

Beesely nodded, deep in thought, then edged closer to Burke and whispered. 'We're holding some Russian computer guys.'

Burke nodded his apparent understanding. Of what, remained to be determined.

Johnno opened the front door, 'Bastards bit me when I fed them, then one shat on my shoes. I'm gunna get a cattle prod.'

Beesely played back the image in his mind, before realising how the Americans could have interpreted Johnno's words. 'So, to business, gentlemen.'

'And what kinda business can you help us with?' Burke asked, folding his arms and easing back.

Otto handed Beesely a bank statement, as with the Israelis, and Beesely slid it forwards. To their surprise, Burke took out a pair of golden, half-moon glasses, holding the page at arm's length. Beesely remained silent, his fingers interlaced and held against his chest as if an earnest monk in prayer. Burke finally gestured with a hand, a conscious plea for explanation.

Beesely eased forwards. 'That money is for your unofficial operations in central Europe. Consider it a gift, of sorts.'

Burke whipped his glasses off. 'Excuse me?'

'Let me explain,' Beesely offered as he stirred his tea loudly. 'I have made a substantial amount of money over the past fifty years, had some shrewd investments at the right time. Now that I'm getting old and ... winding down, I would like to see some of that money put to good use, and by that I do not mean Save The Whale.' He tapped the spoon, deflecting Burke's stare. 'You see, I have spent my entire adult life either in the military or in private security—'

'You sold your interest in those private security companies years ago. You could have made a whack in Iraq!'

Beesely considered that it was obviously a well-used phrase, albeit painfully poor use of Queen's English. 'So it would appear to the wider world,' he stated with menace. 'But you should not believe everything you hear.'

Burke waved the sheet. 'And who knows about this?'

'Just us.' Beesely took the paper back. 'But there are some provisos that we would like to ... *request* before handing over the money.'

'Which little country do ya want invaded?' Burke asked with a grin, glancing at his assistant.

Beesely forced an unfriendly smile. 'Nothing quite so dramatic, young man.' The put down could hardly have been missed. Burke stopped smiling. 'We simply want two things. First, that you do not carry out operations on our turf, and by that I mean Switzerland. And second ... if you have some small operations that we may help you with, that you consider contracting back to our division.'

Burke nodded and cracked a smile. He understood where Beesely had been expertly leading him. 'Business is business!'

'And when *you* are no longer contracted to the CIA...' Burke's eyes widened at the illicit employment offer. 'Some room for consultancy work, for someone with your skills.'

* * *

Elle Rosen lowered his phone, having spent ten minutes talking with his boss at 'the institute', north of Tel Aviv. He sat now in an anonymous mortgage brokers office in Highgate, London.

'Problem?' his assistant enquired after noticing Elle's look.

'We're to stay close to Beesely and K2 where possible. There is an ... *opportunity* here.'

'Will we get any insider information on Swiss banks?'

'With Beesely where he is, I should think so. Besides, Beesely is not who he appears to be.'

'No?'

Elle shook his head, a slight movement. 'He's a longstanding, and *very* highly regarded American asset.' He frowned slightly.

‘And, considering just who he is, the meeting we had today was ... very odd.’

‘The Swiss man was there,’ his assistant pointed out.

Elle wagged a finger. ‘Which could mean that K2 doesn’t know about Beesely. Amazing. It would seem that Beesely has manoeuvred himself into a Swiss bank, a remarkable feat.’

The assistant lifted the Swiss bank account details they had been given. ‘What about this?’

Elle shrugged. ‘Transfer it all, see what happens.’

Past employment present

1

Beesely lowered his newspaper as Jane served him tea and warm scones. Otto smiled up at her, briefly distracted from a mountain of paperwork created by the activities of the last two days.

Beesely tapped the newspaper. 'Says here that a council in ... where is it ... Hertfordshire, has banned the local schools from a nest building project, presumably to help save local birds, because they may damage the trees.'

Otto considered it. 'If a tree is big enough to hold a small wooden nesting box, it is in no danger. I did this when I was a boy.'

'So did I. In fact, there are still a half dozen around here someplace.' He eased upright. 'Right, let us go and annoy some local councils, shall we?'

Otto formed a knowing smile. 'What did you have in mind?' he asked as he took out his phone.

'Let us find someone who makes wooden bird boxes. Better still, self-assembly –'

'For the children to assemble,' Otto finished off.

'Yes, my boy. Let us see if we can get some delivered to every school in Great Britain, anonymously, of course. And an extra large number for Hertfordshire!'

* * *

Willis just stood there, the report in his hand.

'Well?' the director asked, getting impatient.

'You're not going to like this, not after our chat about one... Sir Morris Beesely.' He lifted his face out of the file. 'Both the London Section Head of Mossad, and the London Deputy Section Chief of the CIA, visited our good friend Sir Morris today.' She stared across her desk without comment. He continued, 'We received an anonymous tip, complete with photos of them getting into a helicopter at Docklands.'

She eased back into her chair, staring incredulously at her assistant's revelation, her head spinning with a hundred thoughts, the main one being that there were many things going on under her nose that she did not know about. Taking a breath, she composed herself. 'Fix an appointment with our good friend Mr. Beesely,' she flatly ordered. 'It's about time I finally met the distinguished gentleman. Especially given that *someone* is nudging me that way.'

'Funny you should say that.' Willis produced a second page. 'He just faxed us – on your direct fax line. It says that a chopper is ready anytime we are, to take us down to the country.' Willis passed the fax to her. 'It says the fishing is lovely this time of year.' He clasped his hands behind his back. 'I quite liked the little doodle of the man fishing.'

* * *

'Henry, it's me,' Kirkpatrick said into the phone.

'Yes?'

'Beesely met with the Deputy Section Chief, London. Guy called Hamilton Burke Junior.'

Henry could be heard laughing. 'A rich name for an idiot. I've met the guy. What did they discuss?'

'According to Burke, Beesely offered him a Swiss bank account with a hundred million dollars – in fact pounds - in, for unofficial operations in Europe.'

'That's ... puzzling, to say the least.'

'It sounds as if he's on the team. Sure you don't want me to contact him direct, sound him out?' Kirkpatrick nudged.

'No, not yet, let's see where this goes. Mossad has been checking out Beesely as well.'

'Did *they* get any money?'

'Unknown at the moment,' Henry pointed out.

'What's he up to?'

'Good question.' Henry hung up.

* * *

As the helicopter carrying Dame Helen touched down there were no guards or dogs in sight, they had been hidden. No chairs near the lake, no fishing rods. Johnno stood washing the Rolls Royce, jacket off, but a driver's hat on his head. He had been carefully positioned to be in their direct path to the house, and firmly told not to say anything.

As Dame Helen and Willis approached Johnno, the helicopter's engines winding down, Johnno touched his cap. 'Aft-noon, Ma'am. The old man of the manor 'sup the big house.'

Willis hid a smile. Dame Helen gave Johnno an unfriendly stare, washing the car less than six feet from the 'big house'.

Johnno continued, in his best attempts at a ridiculous accent. 'Appen yud like me to wash 'em windows of ya flying contraption then?'

She took a step towards him. 'John *Johnno* Williams. Formerly a freelance agent, formerly 14 Intel', formerly Sergeant John Williams of the SAS, 1985 to 1994, formerly of 2nd Battalion Parachute Regiment.'

Johnno scratched the side of his face. Returning to washing the car, and continuing with the accent, he retorted, 'Just cos a fella can't hold down no job don't mean mistress dominatrix Helen should be putting on 'im an all.'

Willis fought the urge to laugh.

Beesely stood with Otto in his old study, viewing a bank of newly installed monitors. Otto handed Beesely a crisp new twenty pound note.

'Told you,' Beesely commented as they made their way towards the front door. 'I knew Johnno wouldn't be able to resist.'

'Mrs Eddington-Small. Director. Or may I call you Dame Helen?'

'I'm sure, Sir Morris, that you will call me whatever you like. And, given your historically documented disdain for authority figures, I am sure that *whatever* you call me, and *howsoever* you do, will seem like a thinly veiled insult.'

‘Wow!’ Beesely let out. He edged a step closer. ‘I shall call you Dame Helen then. A perfect blend of authority plus familiarity.’

The guests were ushered into the main room, the old oak table now offering an oddly wide range of food and drink.

She placed down her bag and sat without waiting to be asked. ‘Well, let’s see.’ She glanced around the assorted goodies ranged in front of her. ‘My favourite, used to be my favourite, like those, love those, kids love those - I’m not so fussed these days, Willis loves those, drinks - perfect choice.’ She finally raised her head as Beesely and Otto sat. ‘You’ve undertaken some very thorough research, gentlemen. Commendable in fact.’

Beesely clasped his hands together. ‘From the Director herself that is indeed high praise.’

She helped herself to the Earl Grey tea. ‘You’ve been getting a lot of attention lately, Sir Morris. You keep enough milk in the fridge?’

‘Ah, I must apologise for the clandestine photos of your associates from America and Israel, we just wanted to pique your interest. You are, after all, a busy woman; the pulse of the nation’s security at your fingertips. We figured that prising someone of *your calibre* away from her desk would not be easy. After all, you probably have *numerous* foreign governments to topple with your army of super spies.’

She smiled, threateningly. ‘Ah, if only that was true.’ She stopped smiling. ‘Then I could order certain people shot!’

Beesely cocked an eyebrow. ‘Anyone we know?’

The tea proved excellent and she savoured it, taking a moment to study the man she had heard so much about over the years. ‘Perhaps you could help shed some light on just how your old personnel files went missing.’ She edged closer. ‘Because if, and when, I find any direct evidence of your involvement there will be a police car at the gate –’

‘Which, under British and international treaties and law, would not be allowed onto this property, I am sad to say,’ Beesely stated.

She hesitated. ‘What?’

Otto produced his passport and credentials. 'I am Otto Schessel, Deputy Swiss Ambassador to Great Britain.'

Dame Helen checked his details quickly, thumbing through the pages. 'Mister Deputy Ambassador, I ... apologise on behalf of the British Government if I was in any way rude, but this gentleman—'

'Is residing in an official Ambassador's residence. We have now purchased this property and allow Sir Morris and his assistants to remain here.' Beesely took out his Swiss passport and slid it across the table with a coy smile. Otto continued, as Dame Helen carefully examined Beesely's passport, 'Sir Morris has been assisting my government for some time, and has dual nationality.' She glanced up, her surprise evident. 'Furthermore, he is directly engaged by our Foreign Department as a diplomat of Switzerland.'

'My ... apologies, gentlemen,' she loudly offered, sounding less than sincere. 'I didn't know ... and I was not trying to make any insinuations, Mr. Ambassador, about a member of your staff—'

'Very diplomatically handled, Dame Helen, a true professional,' Beesely remarked with a broad smile. 'But don't worry, we're all friends here, and wish to become better acquainted. I did not invite you down here to make waves, rather to mend bridges. Oh, by the way, we did lift those files and, before you ask, no memoirs. Secrecy is the one thing we are good at.'

'So it would seem,' she reluctantly admitted, handing back the passports.

'More tea?'

'Thanks,' she muttered, resigned to the fact that there was nothing she could do for the moment.

Johno stepped into the room, jacket still off, shoulder holster put back on. He slumped into a leather chair in the corner.

'I'd forgotten he still has a current licence for a weapon,' she commented.

Beesely followed her gaze across to John. 'To business. I'm sure you are busy, saving us from those terrible hordes at our shores.'

She forced a smile. 'Never a dull day.'

'As you are ... not aware, I have been secretly involved with a ... rather aggressive private security agency for a long time, based obviously ... in Switzerland.'

She had been sipping her tea, but now banged down her cup and glanced at Willis. Both were shocked, coming to the same conclusion at the same time.

Beesely continued, 'I guess you have developed some... *concerns* in that area lately.'

'Are you involved with some grotesque vigilante group?' She turned her head a notch and accused Otto with her stare. 'And what does this have to do with official Swiss policy?'

Otto straightened, running a hand down his tie. 'My government has always maintained a very effective, yet ultimately very confidential security organization for the protection of banks and banking activities –'

'Not for foreign or domestic terrorism!' she stated.

'That is correct,' Otto admitted. 'As you can imagine, we deal with some extremely rich people. We also deal with some affluent persons with a ... less than perfect past.'

She tipped her head. 'That's why they go to Switzerland.'

Otto seemed mildly offended, quickly composing himself. 'It is a fact that not all of us agree with. Hence some recent unauthorised changes in policy.'

She raised her eyebrows, mocking him. 'You've started operating outside of the law?'

Otto shook his head. 'We, The Government, are not involved in such activities.'

She turned to Beesely, clearly surprised. 'I would never have taken you for someone so ... gruesome.'

He fixed her with a firm stare. 'We fight fire with fire! And some of the things I did for the Circus, young lady, were pretty *gruesome*, as you put it. Good job none of that made it into the papers.'

She shifted uneasily in her seat. ‘Just how big is this organization? And what part do you play in it?’

Beesely straightened, a quick glance at Otto. ‘Around two thousand staff, departments in twenty countries, bigger annual budget than MI6 and MI5 combined.’ Dame Helen was stunned. ‘And my part? Why, young lady, I *personally* own the whole operation. Another biscuit? Lemon bon-bon perhaps?’

2

After using the bathroom as an excuse to compose herself, Dame Helen returned to the table, not sure where any of this was heading. Beesely stood at the far end of the room, enthusiastically showing Willis a fly-fishing rod. She sat without a word.

Beesely smiled at her as he sat back down. ‘You must be wondering why, exactly, I invited you down here today. Well, it was not to tell you about my secret little organization –’

‘Well done on that, by the way,’ she offered. ‘We had no idea.’

‘Not to worry, my dear, we’re on your side.’ Beesely cleared his throat as Otto passed him a Swiss bank statement. ‘I am well aware of the restrictions placed upon you, Madam Director, both politically and legally. Not to mention financially. Which is why, in my twilight years, I have decided to use some of the money I have made to help you - specifically you - in your current role.’ He slid across the paper. ‘That, my dear, is a numbered Swiss bank account, the funds therein are available to the head of MI6 for unauthorised overseas operations.’

‘It’s SIS these days,’ she cheekily reminded Beesely. She lowered her gaze and read the paper. ‘This is ...’ She pushed the paper away. ‘I can’t accept that, officially or otherwise.’

‘Which is why I shall hold on to it for you. And by that, I mean for whomsoever is head of ... MI6. If you need an operation discreetly funded overseas, you need only pick up the phone and I shall assist you. If there is any comeback, then first they would need to get through Swiss banking laws, then they

would need to get through me - a harder task than you may imagine - then they would have to tie you in. And unless the PM's office bugs your office, I do not see how any of that is likely to happen. Do you?'

Five minutes later, Beesely led Dame Helen towards the lake. 'The conversation we are about to have you can never repeat.' She did not react. 'Not with your own people, the Prime Minister - or even my good friend, dear old General Rose.' She glanced around briefly at the mention of the general. Beesely continued, 'There is only one premise to use as a start point to all this. My loyalties always have been, and always will be, with the security of this nation. In the weeks ahead that premise will be thoroughly tested. Now, we don't have long, so listen well, and read between the lines. Or, indeed, *listen* between the lines.'

Beesely and Dame Helen had wandered around the lake as far as they could before a muddy stream prevented further progress. They turned about and retraced their steps. The warm afternoon air hung still, dragonflies darted about, and the ducks followed - expectantly waiting for the bread that Jane often threw to them - and the swans proudly ignored them.

Dame Helen had not been back in her office more than five minutes when her phone buzzed. She hit a button. 'Yes?'

'General Rose on line one, Ma'am.'

'It never rains...' she quietly let out.

'Ma'am?'

She sat. 'OK. Thank you.'

3

Johno knocked on a door in the village and waited. The door laboriously unlocked with several clicks and finally opened.

An attractive and buxom lady in her thirties peered out. 'Johno?'

'You alone?'

She stared at him for a moment. 'Why don't you cut the small talk and get to the point.'

'Are ... you ... alone?' he carefully mouthed.

'Yes ... I ... am,' she replied, mocking him.

'Good. Because I've got five hundred quid ... and you've got large breasts and a great arse.' He pushed his way in, sitting on the stairs and taking off his shoes.

She watched him, still holding the door. 'And who says romance is dead?'

Twenty minutes later he lit up, stood in just a t-shirt and a pair of socks, looking out of his companion's bedroom window at her overgrown garden.

'So, you raided the piggy bank or something?' she asked.

'Old man Beesely came into some money, gave me some as a... work bonus.' He took a long drag. 'Didn't I promise to fix that garden someday?'

'And *someday* you'll settle down and raise kids in a small cottage,' she quietly suggested as she lay on the bed, half covered.

He laughed, facing her. 'Me, and kids?' He took a drag and peered out the window. 'Yeah, right.'

'Yeah,' she sighed. 'Social services would take them off you in a week.'

He turned his head. 'That bad, am I?'

'No, actually, you aren't, you just like to pretend you are.'

He squinted at her. 'You haven't been talking with my shrink, have you?'

'You have a shrink?'

'I told you before. God, woman, you never listen to me when I'm shagging you!' He feigned hurt.

'So, you ... off soon?' she delicately enquired

'From here ... or from the country?' he asked with a grin.

'I don't mind you being here, you know that.' Their eyes met for a brief second, a sudden look of sadness on Johnno's face, many things going through his mind. 'You said old man Beesely was selling up, heading off somewhere nice and warm.'

‘Change of plans,’ Johno said as he noticed one of her neighbours. ‘Like I said, he came into some money, so who knows what we’ll do.’ He brightened. ‘Anyway, do you think the old bat next door likes my hairy bollocks?’

‘Johno, please. I have to live here.’

He turned, firm signs of arousal.

Her eyes widened. ‘I seriously hope that it was not my neighbour that caused *that*, because I’d be jealous. Not to mention concerned.’

He laughed. ‘No, it’s all this talk of money.’

Her eyes twinkled. ‘You will be gentle with me?’

‘Gentle with you?’ he repeated. ‘Last week you knocked two guys cold in the bar *and* carried them out!’

‘Maybe this time you’ll take your socks off. Still, you are getting better. Time was when the pants didn’t come off. And at least these days we make it to the bedroom!’

As Johno stepped outside he lifted his mobile and dialled. ‘Hello?’

‘Hello?’ came a woman’s voice.

‘Who’s that?’ Johno asked.

‘This is the Alzheimer’s Association. How may I help you?’

‘Oh. Why are you ringing me?’ Johno enquired, a smile forming.

‘You’re ringing us, sir.’

‘Am I? Why did I do that?’

‘Are you OK, sir? Is there someone else there we could talk with?’

‘Yes.’ He waited. ‘Who’s that?’

A sigh could be heard from the other end.

4

A street-corner drug dealer offered no challenge for a well trained and highly motivated assassin equipped with an assault rifle, night sight, silencer and a laser range finder. From this third floor London window, the sniper would not have been visible to

pedestrians in the busy street below, the hum of the traffic loud enough through Soho to mask the sound of a shot from a silencer. The window was propped open just three inches, assuming that anyone could accurately relate to where the shot may have come from.

A gloved hand gripped the rifle, the first trigger pressure taken and held, the sniper's partner picking a target through a night-vision scope. Their supervisor observed from another window, a uniformed police officer at the foot of the stairs to this deserted floor.

'Baseball cap,' the spotter stated in an accented voice.

The sniper adjusted his aim, a red dot becoming visible, a gentle squeeze and a gentle cough being followed by the sound of a metal-on-metal mechanism reloading.

'Good hit,' his partner stated as the target's knee exploded, the victim crumpling.

'Man with padded coat.'

The shot man dropped to the pavement.

The spotter turned to the supervisor. 'The girls?'

The supervisor shook his head. 'Clean up. We go.'

'How many more tonight?'

'You have twelve, quota is twenty, then home.'

* * *

At a private Virginia golf course twelve elderly men gathered around a large table, numerous armed guards patrolling outside and visible through the clubhouse windows.

The white-haired chairman of this meeting tapped the table reverently. 'Gentlemen,' he began. They came to order. 'Are we all well?' he enquired, smiling and glancing at faces over the rim of his glasses, members smiling warmly at each other.

He opened a file. 'OK, first.' Reading from the file he said, 'Our thoughts on just who we support for the next President.'

'Hillary Clinton!' someone joked. They all laughed.

‘With The Terminator as her running mate!’ More laughter followed, the chairman lighting a cigar as the assembled group settled.

‘Does it matter?’ a man finally asked.

The chairman blew out a pall of grey smoke. ‘To a degree, yes. It always helps to have someone ... malleable.’

‘I don’t think Hillary is such a bad idea,’ an English voice suggested.

The chairman tipped his head. ‘Oh? What’s your thinking?’

‘Simple. Put a soft face on the bottle label, while the contents are distilled even stronger.’

Members considered the idea, some nodding.

A man in his forties walked briskly in, something of a ‘whipper-snapper’ in this geriatric gathering. Smartly dressed, he halted at the foot of the table and smiled, shaking his head. ‘Gentlemen, you are going to fall off your seats when you hear this.’ Everyone’s interest was piqued. ‘Beesely is back!’

Heads turned sharply, men glancing at each other. One particular man glanced from face to face, looking out from under his eyebrows. Henry O’Sullivan eased back in his chair, quietly concerned.

The chairman lowered his cigar. ‘When you say he is back...?’

‘Back in the game!’

‘How so?’

The newcomer smiled broadly. ‘By some *very* strange twist of fate that I am still coming to terms with, one Sir Morris Beesely has just inherited control of K2 in Switzerland.’

Henry eased forwards, a puzzled expression. ‘Did you say... he has *inherited* control of K2? Not just working with them?’

‘Personally inherited it all,’ the newcomer affirmed. ‘Don’t know how he accomplished it, but the documents have been registered and verified. As of - well yesterday actually - Beesely owns K2 and The International Bank of Zurich. Got to be worth tens of billions.’

The chairman stared ahead, Henry staring at the table.

‘Our Sir Morris Beesely?’ the Englishman asked.

‘I’m not familiar with this fellow,’ another man called.

The chairman exclaimed, ‘He was one of us. Still is, technically. Stepped down about ten years back, but stayed in touch. His membership dates back to 1949 when he ran assassinations for us. Later he became a full member. Hell, he set up a lot of our institutions and practices. *He* was the second man on the Kennedy assassination.’

‘Then we have nothing to fear?’ a man tentatively asked.

The chairman shook his head. ‘He’s more *us* than we are! Still, we’ll keep an eye on things - bit of a maverick is our Morris.’ He raised his phone. ‘Send Mr. Grey to England, please, to observe Sir Morris Beesely. Thank you.’ He took a long draw on his cigar, staring out of the window, his brow furrowed.

Can I have my job back?

1

Max Hawthorn, current managing director of AGN Security Limited, arrived by car the next morning. At forty-seven, he was just a year older than Johnno, but many years sitting behind a desk had not been kind to him; his stomach hung over his belt and a second chin was starting to emerge. Counterbalancing a bald scalp, his jaw was covered by uneven silver stubble, creating a permanently joyful Santa Claus expression.

He parked his DB7 next to the Silver Ghost then jumped out with a huge smile, bounding up to the vintage Rolls Royce.

‘Morning, Boss,’ Johnno offered as he slapped soapy water onto its bonnet. ‘Miss Daisy is up in the big house.’

‘Johnno, that’s the hardest I have ever seen you work.’ He thrust his hands in his pockets and stood admiring the restored classic.

‘Sod off,’ Johnno muttered as he neared. They hugged affectionately, then patted each other on the shoulder. ‘Good to see you, Boss.’

Max poked Johnno’s chest. ‘Does it still hurt?’ he asked, suddenly serious.

‘Only hurts when I’m sober.’

Max beamed a huge smile. ‘Well then, where’s the bar?’

‘C’mon. The old man is inside.’

Gravel crunched as they walked, chatting feverishly, their words overlapping.

‘Look what the cat dragged in,’ Beesely announced, thrusting a hand forwards to shake.

Max gripped it with both hands. ‘By God, Beesely, you look better than I feel.’

‘Perhaps then, old chap, you should cut down on the pork pies and beer!’

Max laughed, loud and infectious. ‘Life would not be worth living! Good to see you again, really good.’

‘And you too. May I introduce my right-hand man, Otto.’

Otto stepped forward and greeted Max, typically businesslike.

‘German?’ Max puzzled.

‘German-speaking Swiss,’ Beesely pointed out. ‘He heads up my operations in Switzerland.’

Max frowned his surprise. ‘Since when have you had any operations in bleeding cuckoo-clock country? Last I heard you were well and truly retired, selling this place and heading off somewhere nice and warm.’

‘Slight change of plan.’ Beesely suddenly became serious. ‘This is top secret, Max.’

Max had stopped smiling. ‘You back in the game?’

‘Never left, just stepped up a gear. Or ten.’

Max seemed concerned. ‘Pissing in anyone’s pool?’

Beesely inched closer. ‘Crapping in it!’ he whispered.

‘Well that’s more like it! Bit of action.’ He turned to Johnno. ‘What happened to that bloody drink?’

Beesely put an arm around Max’s shoulder and guided him to the oak table as Johnno opened the drinks cabinet. Five minutes later they were chatting about old times. The leather chairs had been moved around to create a more comfortable environment and Max sat with his feet up on an old brown leather footstool.

‘So,’ Max began, ‘you said you had something for me, and wanted something from me. You need men? Soldiers or spooks?’

‘What I would like, old friend, is fifty-one percent of AGN Security.’

Max stopped smiling. ‘You want to buy back in?’ He glanced from face to face.

‘I want to buy back in then leave you as managing director. I get the pick of the boys, you run some ... *errands* for me.’

‘Dangerous errands?’

‘Most certainly.’

‘Stealthy errands?’

‘Quite likely.’

Max shifted uneasily in his seat, putting down his feet and leaning forwards. ‘Thing is, I have new partners in AGN. Whose

shares would you want? I would have to discuss it with them first.'

'These new partners are not worth your time,' Beesely firmly pointed out. 'I've been checking. You don't seem to get along with them and they are not pedigree. They are not even ex-Regiment or Circus.'

'Well ...'

Beesely produced a cheque and handed it over. 'Make them an offer they can't refuse. And should they be stubborn, we will persuade them.'

'Wow!' Max studied the cheque. 'That's at least three times what they paid for their shares.'

'So there should be no problem. Seriously, Max, I want this done and dusted by end of play Monday. Then I want you, not me, to buy control of MSM and Northgate.'

'Northgate? C'mon now Morris, they're international, part owned by the Canadians and Yanks. We're talking a lot of dosh.'

Beesely produced another cheque and handed it over.

'Jesus! Just where're you getting this lot from, you rob a bank?'

'Yes, a Swiss bank.' Max glanced at Otto. Beesely continued, 'What you have never known, was that one branch of my family were Swiss. They have all died now and left me my own banking group.'

'Banking group? Shit, what's it worth?'

'More than our government spends on our entire armed forces in a year. Plus change.'

Max's mouth fell open. 'Blow ... me!' he let out. 'Wow, what a windfall.'

'Yes,' Beesely affirmed as he leant forwards and held Max's arm. 'And I am going to use it to alter the playing field a bit. You in?'

'Damn right I'm in.' He held up his glass. 'To screwing over the establishment!'

Beesely raised his glass. 'Without them even knowing about it!'

Kirkpatrick arrived five minutes late, his watch showing 7.05am. He quickly stepped down and into the boat's galley, the rope lines creaking as it rocked gently at its moorings.

'You look ... harassed,' Henry quietly noted.

'And for good reason.' Kirkpatrick caught his breath after jogging across the huge Pentagon car park. He opened his case and handed his guest a report.

'What's this?'

The boat's owner took off his brown coat, throwing it onto one of the wooden benches that ran parallel to the galley table. 'Updated appraisal of K2's offensive and defensive capabilities.'

'*You* ... authorised this?' Henry questioned, clearly concerned. 'It could have tipped them off!'

'I had close observation on our friend withdrawn,' Kirkpatrick explained as he sat, still breathing hard.

Henry's eyes widened. 'Why?'

'Their boys turned up with sniper rifles with night sights, dog patrols, Israeli laser motion detectors - twenty five grand a piece!'

Henry leant forwards across the table, staring hard. 'What does the appraisal say?'

'That they're about twelve times bigger than anyone thought, armed to the teeth with the latest sophisticated equipment.'

Henry stared. 'And their facility in Switzerland, that secret place?'

'It would take a battalion of Delta Force guys to crack it, all the interesting stuff is underground! They've bought a lot of kit from the Israelis; air filters, water purifiers, gas detectors. That place could withstand a direct nuke attack. Talk about paranoid.'

'How many men at this ... facility?' Henry quietly pressed, staring out of focus.

The analyst offered a concern look. 'Three hundred plus.'

'Three hundred staff?'

'No, three hundred guards! Staff estimates are two thousand plus! Two of our assets in Switzerland have gone over to their

side, two are missing and those still in service are terrified of K2.'

Henry straightened. 'Just when the hell did all this happen?'

'Seems that K2 has been built up on the quiet in the last few years. Official Swiss description of it is deliberately misleading, Swiss Government seems to be happy for them to grow.'

'This alters things. I'll be arranging to remove our project assets and investments in Switzerland - they're exposed. And I have a bad feeling as to why the Swiss have allowed them to grow.'

'Which is...?'

'I can't say.'

Kirkpatrick blinked. 'You can't say ... even to me?'

'I'll need to do some research first. And some things... are more dangerous than others.'

He left Kirkpatrick wondering about that as he left.

2

Colonel Milward, current operational Commanding Officer of the SAS, sounded confused as he sat at his desk, phone in hand. 'Am I in my office? Of course I'm in my office, because this phone has a piece of wire that goes into the wall of my office, *a landline*, which you have just dialled.'

'Actually, old chap, I'm using a satellite phone, and this call is being re-directed by my operations staff in Switzerland,' Beesely pointed out. 'I would hate for there to be any confusion.' He waited.

Milward gave it some thought. 'Of course, my apologies for being brusque. How exactly can I help you, Sir Morris?'

'I have some gifts for your guys. There will be several large lorries arriving at your main gate in a few minutes time. Be so kind as to let them in and find a practical use for the contents.'

'Gifts? Who for? And what for?'

'I'll call you back tomorrow, have to run, just enjoy the goodies.' Beesely hung up.

Milward held his phone halfway between ear and desk as it buzzed the confirmation of a dead line. He pressed zero.

‘Sir?’

‘Front gate.’

A moment later came, ‘Guardroom, Sir.’

‘If you see some large lorries –’

‘They’re here now, Sir. What do you want done with them?’

‘Direct them to the parade ground, then get twenty men to help with unloading.’

‘Unloading what, Sir? We need a forklift?’

‘Don’t know, we’ll see when we get there.’

Milward stepped to the window of this new, two-storey building, a commanding view over the rest of the single storey prefabs and metal huts. His view over the uniform collection of buildings led off to gentle green hills in the distance. ‘Old man Beesely. What’s he up to?’

The parade ground appeared after a short walk along concrete paths, squarely navigating around several single storey buildings with green-painted metal roofs. Several senior officers and adjutants trailed along after Milward’s cryptic mumblings.

‘What the hell?’ he protested as an eighteen-wheeler slowed to a crawl across the parade ground. Three smaller trucks followed it in and parked up as inquisitive soldiers started to see what was up.

The juggernaut hissed to a stop and the driver clambered out, wearing neat blue overalls. ‘Morning,’ he offered as he jumped down, stepping immediately to the rear. A powered loading ramp started to descend.

Milward looked to his officers. They looked back expectantly. ‘Don’t look at me, I just work here.’ He marched to where he could view the unloading.

The lorry driver wheeled an off-road motorbike down the ramp, carefully applying the brakes and pushing it toward the first soldier. ‘Grab this mate, keys are in it.’

The soldier took the handlebars, threw a leg over and a few seconds later sped along a track. Twenty more bikes came off the back, followed by a dozen quad bikes and fifty mountain bikes.

In short order, the buzz of engines filled the air and several near misses were eliciting a lot of shouting. Milward and his officers were puzzled, the parade ground noise now attracting more onlookers. Fifty canoes were unloaded, laid out and inspected as troopers jumped into the trucks en masse.

A hundred and fifty garden barbecue sets were soon laid out on the edge of the grass. As the front of the line grew the back of the line began to disappear, as if a creeping snake.

A Captain stepped up to Milward. 'They're nicking the bloody barbecue sets!' Milward did not reply. 'Do you want one?' the Captain whispered.

'Please.'

The Captain retrieved two as the din grew, bikes and quads flittering about the base.

'Sir,' a soldier called. 'There are thousand cans of lager coming out of that one.'

'Couple of hundred in the Officers' Mess, same in the NAAFI, rest split equally. And I want some left for staff on ops!'

'OK, Boss. What about the spirits?'

'Same deal.' He clicked a finger at an officer who had been close enough to hear. 'Make sure.'

'Yes, Sir.'

'What's that?' Milward asked no one in particular, pointing to dozens of long thin boxes being unloaded.

'Fishing rods!'

'Fishing rods?' Milward quietly repeated. Then louder, 'And those boxes?'

'Trainers. Hundreds of 'em, all sizes, Boss. I got some for my kids.'

'Sir,' an officer called from his left. 'Combat binoculars. Expensive stuff - good Swiss stuff.'

'Make sure they all go under lock and key!' Milward ordered. '*Do not* let them out of your sight!'

'Sir, these boxes have laptops in.'

'Laptops? God's sake, laptops?' They had to be inspected. 'My office. All of them.'

'Satellite phones, Boss, couple of hundred.'

‘GPS position finders, Boss.’

‘Gents’ fleeces, Boss.’

‘Waterproofs here.’

‘Box of a thousand tampons?’ The soldier scratched his head and frowned.

‘Scuba gear coming out.’

‘Lawn mowers, Boss.’

‘Excellent. I want one at my house before end of work today. Start clearing this stuff away.’

‘Ropes, Boss. Helmets.’

‘Frozen barbecue steaks, Boss.’

Milward smiled. ‘Guess they are supposed to be used up today. Staff Sergeant!’

‘Sir.’

‘Dozen barbecue sets over there. Beer and steaks, you’re in charge of the lawn party.’

‘Right, Boss.’

His adjutant laughed to himself as he walked past, carrying way too much of whatever was in the boxes, Milward shaking his head.

3

Otto brought the TV news to Beesely’s attention, Johnno told to sit and *observe*.

NEWS ON THE HOUR.

BREASTS, BREASTS AND MORE BREASTS. NO, NOT A BAR ROOM JOKE, BUT THE SCENE TODAY OUTSIDE THE HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT AS MORE THAN ONE THOUSAND ACTIVISTS AND SUPPORTERS OF A BREAST CANCER RESEARCH CHARITY STRIPPED OFF AND BARED THEIR BOSOMS IN PROTEST AT THE LACK OF GOVERNMENT *SUPPORT* - PARDON THE PUN - FOR BREAST SCREENING ISSUES.

THERE WERE SEVERAL MINOR CAR ACCIDENTS AS STARTLED MOTORISTS CAUGHT AN EYEFUL OF HUNDREDS OF WOMEN OF ALL AGES, MANY

MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS, BARING THEMSELVES. TOURISTS PHOTOGRAPHING BIG BEN HAD SOMETHING MORE INTERESTING TO PHOTOGRAPH AND THE ROADS WERE BLOCKED FOR ALMOST THIRTY MINUTES BEFORE VANS OF POLICEWOMEN ARRIVED. APPARENTLY THE POLICE DID NOT WANT MEN *HANDLING* THE ARRESTS AND CROWD CLEARANCE.

DOWNING STREET LATER SAID THAT THE PRIME MINISTER WAS KEEPING ABREAST OF THINGS. AND NO DOUBT KEEPING AN EYE ON THINGS AS WELL.'

'We organize that?' Johno asked, smiling.

Otto smiled and nodded.

'I wonder,' Beesely began, 'how Gunter would react if he knew how we were spending his money?'

'I think, maybe, he would turn in his grave - if he had one,' Otto replied.

Beesely turned his head. 'Cremated?'

'Chopped up and fed to a field of pigs.'

'Crikey!' Beesely let out, making eye contact with a stunned Johno.

* * *

In a London hotel room, an American booked in as Mr. Grey, watched the news with a broad smile. He had just stepped out of the shower and now stood naked as he dried, a tanned and muscular body scribed by numerous white scars.

Lifting his mobile, he selected the number of a Virginia lodge. 'It's me. I'm in London, sir, hotel at the airport. Moving out in an hour, be based here for equipment and messages.'

'Anything to report?' Oliver Stanton, chairman of The Lodge, formally requested.

'I've spoken to our people here, and they think that a breast cancer protest rally got ten mil' from Mister Beesely and associates. They were persuaded to bare their breasts right in front of Parliament, sir.'

‘Well, that’s ... rather odd. What else?’

‘We’ve been intercepting traffic for the last twenty hours. Their SAS Regiment had three truckloads of assorted ... things. Gifts, sir.’

‘Gifts?’ Stanton repeated.

‘Things like quad bikes, clothes, binoculars, fishing rods.’

Stanton paused. ‘Oh.’

‘He’s made contact with Mossad and the local CIA, no mention of The Lodge, they don’t know about him.’

‘I’m starting to wonder if he’s going a bit senile. Ask for a distance psych’ evaluation on the available data, plus history,’ Stanton ordered.

‘Yessir. You know he offered the local CIA money towards unauthorised ops?’

‘Ah, now he’s starting to make some sense. Method in his madness, quite clever really.’

‘Sir?’

‘Observe, Mr. Grey, observe. Just remember who he is.’

4

After an hour-long ‘power nap’ Beesely was refreshed, the old grandfather clock in the hall chiming out six o’clock. He had changed his clothes, freshened up and was ready to start again.

Johno and Max sat by the lake on fold-down aluminium chairs, several empty beer cans littering the grass, some floating on the lake. Beesely found Otto staring out of the main dining room window towards the lake, hands clasped behind his back. Otto had heard Beesely’s approach, and half turned his head, but remained where he stood as Beesely joined him.

Otto sighed. ‘He does not take life seriously.’

Beesely peered through the glass, taking a moment to think. ‘Johno had a difficult childhood, finding a purpose and some respect in the Army. The lifestyle, the discipline and the adventure suited him. He excelled ... and it made me proud to observe his progress. It was a little nerve wracking when he landed on the Falklands, and again when he joined the SAS like

his old man. But if he knew what his real father was up to then it would have been him doing all of the worrying.

‘He was torn to pieces in Kosovo, shot seven times. They left him for dead, but the stubborn bastard crawled away, plugged up some of the holes and got his radio working, fixing his position by co-ordinates and the name of the village he was near. The rest you know - how Ricky rescued him.

‘His fitness has never returned ... and he is getting older. Smashed bones, torn ligaments - things of that nature never really heal. He feels a great deal of pain each day, but never mentions it.’

‘Our doctors in Switzerland can probably help - they are very good. When we go I shall arrange examinations for you all, no expense spared,’ Otto enthusiastically offered.

Beesely nodded as he thought, then took a breath. ‘You may help his body, his mind is another thing altogether. He does not take life too seriously because that’s the best way for dealing with being shot up and left to die in the mud. I think they call it Post Traumatic Stress Disorder these days. When I was a lad it was called Shell Shock.’

‘Your father was in the World War One.’

‘Yes, the *First World War*,’ Beesely corrected, carefully pronouncing the words.

‘I am with the Swiss Reserve, *on the books*, as you say. All young men have to do it, six months. After this, two weeks’ camp a year in the summer, two weeks’ winter training. Gunter was keen for me to be involved, he often complained that I was not so strong.’

‘Tell me about these ... executions?’ Beesely delicately nudged.

‘Gunter killed many people. I do not know how many, perhaps fifty, perhaps two hundred. Some were business competitors, some were people he had dealings with in the Wehrmacht. About fifteen years ago he became the owner of a group of factories in Italy and he had problems with the Mafia. They are very different cultures, Swiss and Mafia.’

Beesely’s eyes widened. ‘Very different indeed!’

‘So there were some problems. At first Gunter offered them some money, but they always wanted more.’

Beesely glanced out of the window. ‘People like that always want more.’

‘One year they killed a factory manager, a German man with a family who was known to Gunter. So Gunter killed the local Mafia representative, a union manager. At first the Mafia believed it was a local problem, but after they asked again for money, two more Mafia men were killed. Then they sent several Mafia men to Switzerland; it was not a good idea. Gunter had them all killed, and then he made a film of their bodies and sent the film to the Mafia and photos to the newspapers in Italy.

‘For six months there was no problem, then a Mafia man became close to Gunter, close enough to shoot a rifle and miss. Gunter found the man and tortured him tied to a chair, the torture taking many days. They kept this man alive and they made a film of his torture and his death. This film Gunter sent to the Mafia.

‘The Mafia were not so intelligent, I think. They sent another two men, one after the other. They both ‘got the chair’ in the same style. After this, the factory was burnt down by the Mafia, but no more Mafia men came from this family.

‘Gunter liked the torture, and used it for business people who he had the problems with. It became very effective. Some groups would not go to Switzerland, some groups were very respectful towards Gunter and K2. Also it was a signal to his staff, that if they betrayed him they would *get the chair*.’

Beesely raised his eyebrows in a look of mock horror. ‘I bet loyalty has not been a problem!’

‘No, but not only for this reason. My staff know that they will be treated well for life, but if they betray me they will be found wherever they go in the world. But I do not wish my staff to be afraid of me.’

‘In the game we’re in there needs to be respect and fear. We deal with killers every day. *We ... can not afford to be weak.*’

Otto nodded as he considered Beesely’s words. ‘For many years, when Gunter started to become unwell, I moved staff into higher places if they were more loyal to me than to him. All

believed I was his son, so I would say to people 'he will not live much longer, then I am boss' and people would respect this, do what I said. I also identified twenty people who were of Jewish parents; no one Jewish was allowed in the organization by Gunter.'

'Not that there are many Jews in Switzerland,' Beesely suggested. 'What, fifteen thousand in the whole country, most around the Zurich canton?'

Otto seemed surprised by Beesely's knowledge, his expression and slight head tip suggesting he agreed with Beesely's estimate. 'The managers I selected hid the fact that one parent or grandparent had been Jewish, which is common in Switzerland. I contacted them and told them the truth about me. We have a ... secret society, inside K2. Many of the current managers inside K2 are from this group, loyal to me.'

'And your driver?'

'He has this problem, a Jewish grandmother. If it was known he could not work in bank security.'

'Ever suspected any Mossad infiltration?' Beesely asked.

'No, I think the staff would say, since we all had this secret.'

'And when Gunter died, his will?' Beesely probed.

'I told the managers that the will mentioned the fact that I was not his biological son. They were shocked. So we destroyed the will and started to look for the closest relative; the managers responsible for this task were all from my inner group. One manager seemed uncertain, a man not from my group, so he was sent to run casino security in the south of France. After three months he had a small accident.'

'And what would the Swiss Government do if it knew about the inner Jewish group?' Beesely asked.

'The Federal Swiss Government is trying, on the surface at least, to be less ... anti-Jewish.'

'Anti-Semitic,' Beesely corrected. 'I understand that before 1874 no Jews were allowed to enter the country.' Otto agreed. 'And only thirty thousand allowed in at the start of the war, before they closed the borders and turned them back?' Again Otto agreed. Beesely was about to walk off when he stopped and

paused, turning back to face Otto. 'You have said nothing of the noises you must have heard during the night.'

Otto took a moment to think. 'I ... understand.'

'With all due respect, Otto, I doubt you fully understand what pain both Johnno and Jane have gone through in their lives. You are joining quite a dysfunctional family. We make Johnno's favourite cartoon family, those ... Simpsons, look quite normal.'

A car pulled up on the gravel, observed by Beesely and Otto. 'We will have to check if we have enough milk,' he muttered as they stepped outside to greet their guest.

The driver jumped out of a Silver Mercedes, glancing at the house before opening the back door. The man clambering awkwardly out of the rear appeared to Otto to be in his late sixties, overweight and tall - well over six foot; getting out of the vehicle had been a struggle. The guest straightened himself, putting on his jacket, taking in the house and grounds for a moment before stepping forwards. The two pairs of men walked towards each other across the gravel, as if cowboys squaring off for a gunfight.

'Mr. Beesely.'

'Mr. Short.'

'Thought you sold this place.'

'We did, kind of equity release deal. I still get to live here.'

The guest seemed mildly disgusted, not impressed at all. Then two guards with dogs came into view near the woods, another two with dogs on the far side of the lake, two more shutting the gate behind them.

'Expensive security,' Mr. Short noted.

'Tax deductible.'

'Tax deductible?' Short puzzled.

'Company men.'

The very tall Mr. Short took a long look around; cameras on the house, infrared. 'What company are you keeping these days?'

'We could stand here all day exchanging pleasantries. Why don't we go in and sit down, have a nice cuppa, or something stronger if you prefer.'

Short walked forwards. 'Your deal, you called this meeting.'

They walked slowly inside. Two more guards stood next to the stairs, carefully studied by Short as he entered the main room. Johno stood with his jacket off, holster on.

‘Mr. John Williams. Still alive and well?’

Johno shrugged his shoulders. ‘Can’t complain.’

‘That’s not what I’ve heard about you.’

Johno offered the back of Short’s head a quick glare and a curled lip as the visitor passed him.

Short sat down and helped himself to a biscuit. He felt the temperature of the teapot then helped himself to a cup as the others sat. ‘So, old Miser *Sir* Morris Beesely,’ Short began in patronising tones. ‘What is it that you wished to discuss, exactly? I’m a busy man!’

Otto stood up, as planned, to start the amateur dramatics. But as Beesely listened, he became certain that Otto was not acting at all. ‘I do not know what your business relationship is with Sir Morris, Mr. Short, but I do not appreciate your attitude, neither do I conduct business in this tone and manner.’

Short seemed distinctly unimpressed by the speech. ‘What are you, Dutch?’

‘Swiss. I am a senior official in K2.’

Johno hid a smile.

Mr. Short’s face now betrayed the fact that he had heard of K2, and was aware what they did to people they did not like. He slowly lowered his tea, missing the saucer and placing it onto the table.

Beesely led Otto by the arm, back into his seat. ‘Gentlemen, no one ever benefits in business from conflict. We are all sensible people, we all have wants and needs and desires. We have things to sell, and things we need to buy. That is the art of negotiation.’

Short sat nodding in agreement with Beesely, clearly terrified. ‘What is it that my company can do for you?’

Beesely smiled inwardly, Short now diverting any implied threats from him personally, and towards his company. ‘You are well placed in the international secure parcel industry, Mr. Short, and our research suggests that you are good at what you do. You

run a tight ship, you keep a single-minded stranglehold on your staff - especially your junior directors, and you are... *discreet* in your dealings with many and varied groups. In a nutshell, Mr. Short, you are an aggressive, secretive, criminally minded player who seems to be going places. And we like that. We'd like you on our team.'

Short's demeanour suddenly took a U-turn in the road and put its foot on the gas. 'Oh, right.'

Beesely continued, 'And there are distinct advantages to having friends like us.'

'Yes, there are,' Short confirmed, now regaining a lot of his composure. 'But what are you looking for from me? You want items moved around the world?'

'My good fellow, everyone wants items moved around the world,' Beesely explained. 'Especially us!'

'Then I'm your man.'

So, it's back from his company, now all about him, Beesely considered.

'Before we go any further, Mr. Short, are there any problems or impediments to your current growth ... anything that we might be able to help you with?'

Short gave it some thought, now happy enough to help himself to another biscuit. 'Well,' he began, spilling some crumbs onto the table. 'I've been watching one of my junior directors lately. I suspect he's going to split off and set up in competition against me.'

'Oh dear, that just won't do. His name?'

'Robinson, bit of a fag. Lives in Wimbledon.'

Beesely turned his head to Otto, who produced his phone.

'This is Otto. British man, name Robinson, junior director of Secure Transit Limited, Holborn, London. Robinson lives in a place called Wimbledon. Arrange for cash to be found at his house and details of multiple bank accounts, Cayman Islands, notify tax authorities. Arrange for documents relating to insider share dealings to be found also. He must become a disqualified director within the next month.'

Mr. Short was mildly stunned. 'What ... just like that?'

‘Just like that,’ Beesely confirmed, nudging the biscuit tin forwards. ‘Have another biscuit.’

As Mr. Short used the bathroom, Otto produced a thick wad of fifties and handed it to Beesely. After smelling the wad, Beesely banged the table with it before chucking it to Short’s driver.

The man caught it and pocketed it quickly. ‘Always nice doing business with you, Sir Morris.’

‘Stay in touch,’ Beesely quietly ordered. ‘I want to know what that fat slob is up to, step by step.’ The man gave a quick affirmative nod.

When Short returned, Otto presented him with a million pound cheque, for just fifteen percent of the shares in his business. After a ten-minute stroll with Beesely, the visitor bounded to his car with vigour and enthusiasm.

‘Now that’s how you do business,’ he told his driver as they set off. ‘You could learn a lot from me.’

‘Aye, sir,’ the driver smiled.

Beesely turned from the window to Otto. ‘That fellow, Robinson, when he gets caught, let him know that it was our friend Mr. Short that stitched him up, and then recruit him for future endeavours.’

Otto approved of the idea.

As Short’s car joined the main road, just beyond the village, a man in a coffee shop noted the number plate and recognised the face. He dialled a number in Virginia, USA, as he stepped out.

5

Otto clinked glasses with Beesely. ‘It has been an interesting few days, very busy. You are well?’

‘Never felt better, got the blood pumping.’

‘Each meeting these past days was staged quite differently.’

‘Did you learn anything useful?’ Beesely asked.

‘I hope so. I have taken notes and we have the camera footage. I will study it. How you do business, it is very different from us Swiss.’

‘Of course it is, my boy. Salesmanship - one size does not fit all!’ Otto seemed puzzled. Beesely explained, ‘When I was ten years old, a shoe salesman came and sat on my friend’s garden wall in the village, not far from here. In those days a door-to-door shoe salesman was not so uncommon. He did not look well and asked me for a glass of water, which I fetched. As he sat there, he said he had something important to tell me. What I did not realise was that he was having a heart attack. Well, you don’t when you’re ten years old.

‘So he started to try and tell me, for reasons best known to himself, how to be a good shoe salesman. He told me all about how to assess the person and their house and garden before attempting to sell the shoes. I remember his favourite trick was always to pretend he had an appointment ... and that *this* must be the wrong house, getting the sympathy of the householder. Then he would comment on their garden, their house, always looking for something unusual before he ever attempted to sell any shoes.

‘Sturdy shoes for the working man, handsome shoes for the teenage daughter, practical shoes for the mother. He had the situation sized up before he ever spoke about the shoes themselves. The longer he talked about gardens, the longer he had to make an assessment of the family - and their needs. If the family had new shoes, he would walk off to find that *wrong house*. If the household’s car looked clean, but their shoes looked old, he would talk about style. It was all about selling to that person what the person needed, and often without them knowing about it.

‘He died on that wall, falling off and into my friend’s vegetable patch. I have often wondered if he knew he was dying, and why he tried to impart that knowledge to me. You see, it was the only thing of value he had, and at the end I guess it made him feel ... proud of his life in some way. His last words were, *one size does not fit all!*’

‘You know, I remember now, I had a strange notion at ten that you had to bury people where they fell. Got it from some old cowboy movie I think, people falling dead off horses in the desert and being buried where they fell. Anyway, when I realised he was dead I went and fetched a shovel, just as the village constable arrived. When asked what the shovel was for I replied that I was planning on burying him in the vegetable patch before the vultures got him. Still remember the look on the constable’s face.’

* * *

The meeting of African Union members, hosted now in Paris, approached the end of the formal greetings and opening speeches. All African delegates, plus members of the UN and the European Union, adjusted their translation screens, the various speakers’ words translated to text and the recipients’ computer screens adjusted by touch-screen language selection.

As the head of the European Union’s Overseas Development Department finished up, the background image on the computer screens changed from a pastel blue to an image of the Zimbabwean Ambassador easing out of a pink limousine.

6

The noise coming from the yard at 3am alerted the desk sergeant. He glanced at the monitors in time to see a small lorry dumping its load into the middle of the police car park.

‘Shit!’ he cursed as he jumped up, wishing he had spotted it earlier. He pressed the station’s tannoy button. ‘All available officers to the rear car park!’

The sergeant knew he could not leave the desk, not least because there were prisoners shouting for attention; lock-up had a recent delivery of drug addicts waiting to be processed, when they became a little more coherent. Officers rushed by, male and female, as he pressed the buzzer for the back door.

‘Go on. Quick!’

The shift duty officer appeared. 'What's up?' he asked, expecting a van full of new arrivals 'kicking-off'.

'Some damn lorry driver is dumping his load in our yard!'

'He's what?' the officer barked, now bolting out with others.

The first officer could not believe the sight that greeted him: pistols, rifles, sub-machineguns, shotguns, magazines with ammunition in, loose rounds rolling around, all in their yard. They checked the cab. Empty. Later they would find that the lorry had been stolen, no prints.

Close to two hundred weapons of all sorts were now lying in a pile as twelve officers stood around, looking confused. The area got hastily taped off – just in case, bomb disposal called and everyone warned to stand back. The chief constable put in an appearance at 7am, adding to the 'much scratching of heads', as the desk sergeant had reported it to his wife at the end of his shift. It's not every day that someone dumps several hundred illegal weapons on the police's doorstep. Or in this case, their back yard.

New beginnings

1

Sunday morning had brought some new additions to the household. From his bedroom window, Beesely noted a large pile of building materials outside the old cottage beyond the lake. He put his glasses on. The lakeside grass now offered two benches, each sat facing the lake and bisected by a small pontoon reaching twenty feet into the lake. He stepped across to his second window. A small wooden bridge now spanned the stream feeding the lake, allowing someone to stroll all the way around the lake unimpeded. He smiled. And against the old fence that edged the wood he noticed reels upon reels of new green metal fencing.

Ten minutes later, Beesely found Otto supervising the erection of a large conservatory on the side of the house that viewed the lake, previously a neglected vegetable patch. Now it hosted quick drying cement, one side of the conservatory already up. Stopping and surveying the grounds, he noted many men in yellow plastic waistcoats. ‘Morning,’ he greeted Otto, squinting against the bright summer sun. ‘You do realise,’ he pointed out, studying the new conservatory’s foundations, ‘that this is a listed building?’

Otto smiled. ‘Not any more, it was ... de-listed. Have you had breakfast?’ he asked, clipboard in hand.

‘No, not yet. Why don’t you join me.’

Otto handed a builder the clipboard and followed Beesely inside. They found Johnno sitting in the kitchen, with a coffee and a headache.

‘What we doing today?’ Johnno croaked out.

Beesely sat as Jane served tea and toast for him. ‘Just a few phone calls, then we’re off cuckoo clock hunting.’

‘Good,’ Johnno quietly stated. ‘We can go and sit in Otto’s kitchen, let him do the dishes.’

Beesely attended his toast. 'Just when, pray tell, was the last time *you* did the dishes here?'

Johno thought back. 'That's not the point.'

Otto and Beesely exchanged smiles, unseen by Johno.

'I'll pack a case this afternoon,' Jane suggested.

'You will not need much,' Otto told them. 'There are clothes waiting for all of you in Zug.'

'Zoog?' Johno repeated without looking up.

'Zed-you-gee,' Otto assisted.

Johno toyed with him. 'Zugggg, then?'

Otto continued, ignoring Johno's language deficiencies, 'It is on a lake, twenty kilometres south west of Zurich. Our headquarters are three kilometres south of the town, on the southern lake shore.'

'Sounds nice,' Jane offered.

'It is very beautiful.'

Johno turned to Otto. 'Do the barmaids carry those huge pint glasses and have big boobs?'

'I am sure some of the barmaids have big *boobs*, as you say. And they can all carry the beer glasses with one litre in.'

Beesely held up a finger. 'Private jet will take us there. Just a one hour flight.'

'Learjet?' Johno asked, brightening.

'Yes,' Otto confirmed. 'And we make use of Gulfstreams for longer journeys.'

'Johno can pilot most aircraft types,' Beesely proudly pointed out to Otto.

Otto informed Johno, 'There is a Cessna 172 at the airfield outside of Zug. You can fly it through the mountains if you wish.'

'*With* ... a currently qualified pilot sat next to you!' Beesely sternly warned.

Johno picked up a copy of today's News of The World newspaper. 'Keep your knickers on.'

The Learjet flew north-east up the Zug valley, low and slow and affording the passengers a keen view of their new home.

‘Oh, yes!’ Johno enthused as he stared out of the window. He turned and kicked Otto’s leg. ‘Hey, Swiss boy! Tomorrow, you and me, walking boots, some climbing gear, that mountain.’

Otto smiled enthusiastically. ‘It sounds good. That is the small mountain that we use for training. It has the firing range on the far side.’

Beesely gently tapped Jane’s leg. ‘Hey, English girl. Tomorrow, you and me, shopping bag, that small town.’

‘Sounds great,’ Jane agreed, tipping her nose up at Johno.

Through the aircraft’s small round windows they could see two ground controllers as they taxied to a halt, the men wearing fluorescent orange waistcoats and ear-defenders, standing ready with wheel chocks. Lined-up and waiting for them on the airfield’s tarmac stood three black Range Rovers, two K2 guards alongside each vehicle.

With the aircraft halted, a smartly dressed woman walked out from a single storey building to open the aircraft’s door. Otto stepped out first and exchanged a flurry of German with the woman. Johno caught some of it, understanding half. It seemed to be to do with the making arrangements for guests.

‘Watcha babes,’ Johno offered as he emerged into the warm sunshine and straightened. ‘No body cavity search?’

She frowned her lack of understanding, turning to Otto for support, who now shook his head quickly. She offered to take Johno’s bag.

‘Not in this lifetime, love. Verstehen Sie?’

‘Yes, I understand. Welcome to Switzerland, sir,’ she beamed.

‘And never call me ‘sir’, I work for a living.’ Johno walked to a vehicle, giving the woman a respite.

Beesely greeted her in fluent German, friendly, but formal, his vehicle’s doors being opened by tall and muscular guards.

Johno threw his bag into the back of the second vehicle, promptly throwing the driver out; he would be driving, and that was that. As with the lady, he warned the two men in his vehicle

not to call him 'sir', demanding a cigarette. He had smoked all through his military career, but had been forced to give up in hospital and rehab. After that he had just 'kind of lost the habit', as he put it. With the windows wound down, Johnno and his front seat bodyguard lit up.

Beesely tapped Otto's arm as Otto focused on the driver. 'Don't go punishing any of your staff if Johnno involves them in something they should not be doing.'

Otto did not look pleased with the driver. 'This man knows not to smoke in a vehicle.'

'And Johnno is an honoured guest, who probably just ordered your man to join him in smoking.' They clambered into the back of the next vehicle. Beesely continued, 'You will have to warn your people about stuff like this, especially where Johnno is concerned. He is not *command staff* and has no desire to give anyone any orders.'

Otto nodded as he thought. 'I will brief the managers.'

Jane found the drive from the airfield just magical. She wound down the window and breathed in the warm Alpine air. With her driver told to slow down, they enjoyed the tour, Otto rapidly and over-enthusiastically pointing out many things of interest, Johnno soon getting fed up with the snail's pace and shooting past.

A few miles further along the same road the remaining vehicles passed through a wood. Beesely noticed Johnno's black Range Rover parked in what appeared to be a picnic area for tourists, overlooking the lake, his being the only vehicle. Beesely's driver slowed and asked Otto what to do.

'Go on in,' Beesely suggested.

Johnno and his two guards stood leaning against their car, Johnno peering through a large pair of binoculars as the men pointed to something in the distance, across the lake. As the other vehicles pulled in Johnno walked over, calling loudly for Beesely to get out. Beesely had the binoculars thrust into his hands.

'There!' Johnno indicated, holding an arm straight, his finger pointed. 'There.'

Jane wandered down into a meadow as Beesely focused the binoculars.

‘What exactly am I looking for?’ Beesely asked as he refocused the glasses, Otto soon passed a similar pair by a driver.

Johno keenly explained, ‘That peak, go directly left, scree slope, bottom left of the scree where it turns to grass.’

‘There are people there,’ Beesely observed.

‘K2 boys on a training hike,’ Johno informed him.

Beesely turned to Otto, who keenly explained, ‘We have a game for new staff who are being trained. First they run seven kilometres along this road, then they get into canoes on the lake side not far from here.’ He pointed. ‘Then they paddle across the water –’

‘How far?’ Johno keenly asked. ‘A mile, two?’

‘It is two point five kilometres. Then they must walk with heavy packs up to stage one, the hut.’ He gave his glasses to Johno as both men found the hut. ‘Then they change to climbing gear and make the short climb to the west. After this there is a two kilometre trail, a difficult trail, and the final ascent of the mountain, some two thousand feet.’

‘I wanna to do it,’ Johno firmly insisted.

Beesely lowered his glasses. ‘Do me a small favour; spend a week getting into shape, get yourself up to speed and then you can play with the boys. You’re part of the company now -’

‘Not really,’ Johno pointed out. ‘You two are the brains, I’m strictly foot soldier.’

Beesely was left standing as Johno ordered ‘Fritz’, not the driver’s real name, back into the vehicle. He drove off. Beesely exchanged an uneasy look with Otto, called Jane back and set off after Johno.

As they progressed around the lake each new scene improved upon the last. The sun beat through the trees, the views magnificent out across the lake to the right, flashes of meadows to the left; cows, pastures filled with yellow flowers, glimpses of wooded valleys and ornate wooden cottages. When they reached the K2 compound, Beesely believed that they had arrived at a Swiss army base. A uniformed police officer stood guard outside

a large and imposing gate, the gate bracketed uniformly by twin guard huts and a high fence with razor wire. Men in black fatigues stood holding Alsatian dogs on long leads, the dogs panting in today's heat.

Their vehicles were waved straight through, hardly slowing, soon passing rows of small huts, assault courses and isolated buildings, some half sunk into the ground. Beyond the small camp they followed a wooded road higher for two hundred yards, eventually spotting the castle that they had seen from the air. It nestled into a rocky outcrop, stood at the base of a hundred-metre cliff. To the left of it stretched a row of modern, single story office buildings and beyond them ran a row of traditional Swiss cottages, half hidden by trees, backed onto the wooded mountain.

Stepping down from their vehicle, they noticed Johnno stood near his Range Rover, again using his binoculars. This time the binoculars were trained on the cliff behind the castle, Johnno's driver pointing out something of interest.

'Welcome to Schloss Diane,' Otto offered as he stepped around the front of their vehicle.

'Diane?' Beesely questioned as he faced away from the castle. He took in the uninterrupted view of the lake and the wooded hills beyond, the far shore at least a mile in his estimation.

Otto stepped closer, also now facing the lake. 'It was Gunter's favourite ... er ... woman's name,' he explained, glancing at Jane. 'In the year, maybe, 1976.'

Over his left shoulder Beesely could see a straight road stretching away down a gentle slope, a large patch of well-tended grass reaching towards the wooded hill. In the middle of the grass stood an isolated three storey modern office block, some fifty yards from the castle. In front of him he could see another neatly mown area of grass stretching down towards the lake, a line of cottages and a road on the lakeside, perhaps two hundred yards away in his estimation.

Jane took in the castle and its ancient stone walls. ‘Gosh, it’s lovely,’ she suggested to no one in particular. ‘Does it ... have central heating?’

Johno could be heard laughing a short distance away, the other side of his vehicle.

‘I should hope so,’ Beesely said as he led her towards the ornate drawbridge.

Otto described all of the buildings in great detail, their historical significance, the age and origins of the castle and the families that had occupied it over the years. Jane put her coat on as they edged slowly closer to the wooden drawbridge and into the shade, tour-guide Otto in full swing.

‘Magnificent,’ Beesely commented, before quietly adding, ‘Not much of a moat?’ Whatever the moat had originally looked like, now it offered a three-foot deep grassy footpath.

‘It was filled in many years ago. The drawbridge is functional, but just a symbol.’

Beesely half turned his head to notice Johno now joining the tour. Otto followed his gaze, but said nothing.

‘What’s the flag?’ Johno asked, looking up. Two large flags blew in the breeze, one the Swiss flag - red with a white cross, the second a white flag with a horizontal blue line taking up the middle third.

‘The blue-and-white flag is the flag of the town of Zug,’ Otto enthusiastically informed him.

Johno considered it. ‘So, K2 doesn’t have its own flag then? A bit poor.’

Otto smiled, but made no response. Crossing the wooden drawbridge, they entered an original stone walled courtyard that had been roofed over. Three Mercedes were parked, room for four or five more. They walked slowly across a cobblestone floor, glancing up as if tourists, a pigeon flying out as they approached.

The Great Hall they entered was indeed a great hall, a ceiling some fifty feet high, the room not much smaller than the courtyard. They inspected a ten metre wooden table, an original

feature, coats-of-arms on the walls, lances, and several sets of metal body armour, each ghostly Knight holding a large sword.

Otto announced, 'This entrance is not used by the staff. They are next door or inside the mountain. This is for guests.'

'I'd love a complete tour,' Beesely suggested as he admired the shiny armour, 'But I'm a little tired. Can we see our rooms?'

Otto gave a slight head bow. 'Of course. This way, please.'

The contrast between the Great Hall and the next room was stark. This room had been laid out in the style of the foyer of a five star hotel, complete with reception desk, phone booths, a waiting lounge and a boy in a traditional regional costume of shorts and waistcoat standing next to a lift.

'It's Pinocchio!' Johnno whispered, Beesely glaring at him.

All of the staff present immediately stopped and nodded their respects to either Otto or Beesely as the group progressed. The boy opened the lift, taking them to the third floor without being prompted, Beesely thanking him warmly and patting him on the shoulder as they exited. They emerged into an internal corridor, still reminiscent of a grand old hotel, the walls covered with wooden panelling. The ancestral Swiss theme continued to influence the décor with numerous coats-of-arms on the walls, plus an assortment of swords and alpenhorns.

The door Otto opened first was Jane's bedroom. 'Please, make yourself at home, your bags will be here in five minutes. Please use the intercom for service of any kind, and your phone to call myself, or one of the others. We will meet for food when you are ready, the restaurant is on the top floor.'

A little uncertain, Jane glanced at Beesely before stepping in. 'God, it's posh,' could be heard as the door closed.

Next came Beesely's room. It seemed at least twice the size of Jane's, two large windows facing out over the lake and offering a panoramic view. Johnno stared through one, Beesely the other. The windowsills offered bench seating some two feet deep, the castle walls six foot thick and giving the windows the appearance of small tunnels. Johnno leant in and banged on the window frame with the side of his fist.

'They do not open,' Otto informed him.

‘Just as well,’ Beesely commented, looking down sixty feet to the mown grass that surrounded the castle.

‘And the glass is bullet-proof,’ Otto added after Johno had punched his window.

Johno stood in the middle of the palatial room at the foot of a giant four-poster bed. He pointed to a door, ‘Jane’s room.’ Then thumbing at another door opposite, he asked, ‘My room?’

Otto gave him a nod. ‘It is unlocked.’

Johno thrust his hands in his pockets and walked through, opening it with his shoulder, the door slamming shut behind him.

Otto stepped to the window as Beesely continued to take in the scenery, the lake and mountains. ‘Will he be OK?’

‘That depends,’ Beesely sighed, still transfixed by the magnificent view, ‘on whether or not he finds something useful to do.’

Through the window Beesely could see the top of the courtyard roof; numerous small spires tiled with grey slate, triangular flags waving in the breeze. Beyond that he could see the top of the drawbridge, two stone towers with slate-tiled spires again.

He turned fully around, examining the window’s writing table. ‘If you lock up a stallion in a small field it goes mad. Lock up a lion in a small cage and it goes to sleep, gets fat ... then goes mad.’ He lifted his gaze to Otto. ‘He needs a mountain to climb, and I don’t mean one of those outside.’ Otto seemed puzzled, Beesely explaining, ‘He needs a task to perform. A respectful, challenging, important task.’ Otto brightened, nodding his understanding. ‘Johno!’ Beesely called.

Johno came back through quickly, checking the room as if there might be trouble.

Beesely took Otto’s arm. ‘I’ll call you in an hour or so.’ Otto bowed his head and left.

‘What’s up?’ Johno curtly asked.

Beesely took a chair near the window, kicking one out for Johno. ‘Small problem.’ Johno sat. ‘I was talking with Otto when you were snoring on the flight, also read some files last night. Seems they have some problems with their agents.’

Johno focused on Beesely, making strong eye contact. 'What kind ... of problems?'

Beesely eased back and crossed his legs. 'I believe it's the training. Either that or it's the Swiss culture. You see, they're turning out very fit marksmen who are complete androids, programmed to think a certain way and stumbling at problem solving in the field.'

Johno's eyes widened. 'Not surprising is it. Take a look at those drivers just now. Top men here, fit and trained in all the technical stuff, but no balls or independent thought. If a VIP in Hereford told the driver to get out he'd be told to piss off and get in the back. These ... *wankers* are all wound up and shit scared of authority.'

'Well, they are Swiss,' Beesely emphasised with a pained expression. 'When was the last time you heard of a British or American security firm hiring a Swiss bodyguard?'

'Frigging never,' Johno coughed out.

'Exactly.'

'Our boys go all over the world, best there is. Even the Yanks want Hereford boys.'

'So ... how do we make these obedient little robots *tick-tock* our way?' Beesely waited.

Johno eased back in his chair, grey matter starting to fire up as Beesely observed him. 'It's like you said, all culture. They need twelve weeks in Hereford.'

'Or ...'

Johno brightened, a sly grin forming. 'Or twelve weeks here with some Hereford boys.'

'Might work,' Beesely reluctantly admitted. 'We've got the ex-Regiment staff in AGN Security with Max, but not many old training dogs though. No warrant officers.'

Johno straightened. 'I know a few, I could put a team together. Got the space over here, the mountains and the kit. Just need a programme that will stretch their minds when their bodies are under pressure.'

Beesely seemed cautious. 'Well, I don't want to break too many of Otto's people –'

‘Sod ‘em, this ain’t kindergarten! It’s for their own good anyway, keep the wankers alive longer.’

‘Well, you may be right,’ Beesely let out with a sigh. ‘Let’s grab some of their training plans from Otto - you can go over them. Fly back when you need to, smoke out Hereford, throw some money around and see who we can get?’

Johnno nodded enthusiastically. ‘I could set up ten different programmes just off the top of my head. Frigging great facilities here; lake, mountains, probably white water rafting, climbing, shooting ... and not a soul in sight for miles.’

‘You’ll need to be tip-top secret squirrel back home,’ Beesely quietly warned. ‘No one comes here we cannot trust two hundred percent.’

‘Yeah, yeah, I know the drill. Get me them files.’ Johnno stood.

Beesely picked up the phone on his bedroom table. ‘Can you ask Otto to pop back in? Thanks.’

‘Time for a shower, shit and a shave, Boss. Catch you after ya’ nap.’ The door slammed behind him.

A minute later Otto knocked.

‘Come in.’

Beesely motioned Otto towards the seat Johnno had vacated. Holding a finger to his lips he signalled for Otto to talk quietly, glancing at Johnno’s door. He began, ‘I’ve told Johnno that we are not happy with your training programme for agents, although I am sure it is excellent. He will get experienced SAS instructors here to develop additional training programmes, designed to make your guys think a bit. That will give him something to do, make him feel wanted, useful and ... *necessary*.’

‘But it is not so artificial, this task. Your SAS people are very good, and we want their training. I have considered many times giving work to ex-SAS soldiers, other than Ricky, but I could not trust them. Here my people are with me for life, I know them. And I do not know if these English people will trust or respect me.’

Beesely put his hand on Otto’s arm. ‘They will trust me, and they will respect me. And in time they will do so with you as our

reputation grows. And, more importantly, they all know what happened to Johnno, his story is one told over and over, given as examples in training lectures. They respect him.'

'It is good,' Otto enthused.

'Be a good lad, and get Johnno some English versions of the outdoor training programmes that you use for your guys.'

'OK, Boss,' Otto said with a smile as he stood.

3

An hour later Beesely was awake. After a refreshing cup of tea with Jane in his room, he gave her the task of checking out the kitchens and letting the chefs know what their new visitors liked to eat and drink.

Now Otto led Beesely and Johnno back to the lift. 'Foyer,' he told the boy.

'To the bat cave,' Johnno whispered to the boy with a wink. The boy did not understand, so Otto explained in German, making the young lift attendant laugh.

They found themselves back in the foyer walking past the reception desk, turning right and down a long corridor of Spartan décor - magnolia walls and a few bland watercolours, Otto leading them on at a brisk pace.

The double doors they came to were metal, Johnno noted, and appeared strong enough to withstand a terrorist attack. He could see two cameras, one in each corner and angled down, two spy holes, a slot of some sort that reminded him of a Second World War pill-box, a numeric touch pad and several other buttons. Expecting a laborious entry ceremony, the visitors were relieved to find the doors being opened from the inside by armed guards in black fatigues, holding the heavy doors and tipping their heads. A blast of warm air washed over them, a contrast to the decidedly chilly corridor.

'Oh my!' Beesely whispered.

They had heard the stories from Ricky and had spoken with Otto, but that had not prepared them for what awaited.

'Doctor No's cave?' Johnno whispered.

Directly ahead ran a circular walkway skirting around the edges of a sunken room as big as the courtyard. It housed numerous small alcove workstations, flickering computer screens in subdued light. Half were occupied, a mixture of men and women in smart business suits.

Below the walkway, the lower level that could have been taken out of any British bank headquarters; rows of computers sat on ultra-modern looking desks, swivel lamps, flipcharts, white boards, fifty men and women buzzing round. At the end of the lower level nestled several doors, people coming and going. From the ceiling hung a large set of central lights, strongly illuminating the desks.

Beesely stepped forwards for a better view, to the top of the stairs that gave access to the lower level, and accidentally into the edge of the stronger light. Immediately the buzz stopped, staff standing and facing toward him. Even the people in the alcoves around the upper level paused and stood up.

He took a deep breath and turned his head to Otto, who had hung back, and quietly said, 'If I may.' He addressed the entire staff, a greeting in English, German and then French. 'As you are, not doubt, already aware, my name is Sir Morris Beesely, and I will be working with you in the near future. The success of that work will originate in good ideas, will grow from strong teamwork and will be rewarded with the knowledge of a job well done. And no one need fear making a mistake - we are all human. In the days and weeks ahead I will get to meet many of you individually, and discuss your particular project areas and tasks. Please forgive me if I do not remember all of your names, I'm getting old.

'In the meantime, I do not want anyone to stop work, at any time, because I am in the room or even standing nearby. Your work and your duties are important, not least to your own self-respect. The only time I wish you to deviate from your work is when it is obvious that I wish to speak with you personally. Please return to your tasks. Thank you all.' Beesely took a large step backwards.

'This way,' Otto led. 'Your office.'

Overlooking the command centre, Beesely's new office was on a grand scale. 'Chairman of the board,' he commented as he entered the Spartan office.

The desk was an antique, made from a dark red wood. It supported two computer screens, two keyboards and two desk phones. And its chair would have impressed the most ostentatious company director. Behind the desk ran a curved wall, several pleasant watercolours hung along its length, a waist-high fitted cabinet running the full length of the room. One cabinet door hung open, revealing a fridge. Immediately inside the main door, radiating outwards along the internal wall, sat a row of a dozen comfortable chairs.

Beesely ran a hand over the desk's cool surface. 'Was this Gunter's office?'

'Yes, but I had everything removed and destroyed and decorated for a second time.'

Beesely turned to face Otto. 'I was not suggesting that I would have objected to using Gunter's office.'

'I did object. That is why I removed everything.'

Beesely nodded. 'I see.'

'Where's my office then?' Johnno joked, taking in the surprisingly plain office.

'In the dungeon,' Otto flatly answered, causing Beesely to laugh.

'Swiss boy Robinson's got a sense of humour after all!' Johnno pointed out to Beesely.

'No, it is not a joke. You have an office. Come, this way.'

Otto moved off, Johnno stepping up to Beesely. 'He'd better be fucking joking.'

Beesely beamed a smile as he put an arm around Johnno and led him out.

'The dungeon!' Otto announced. It was one floor down in the same lift, the lowest level.

Johnno thrust his hands into his pockets. 'So this is my office,' he muttered. There was actually a small desk in the corner of this large room, a computer sat atop it, a group of white boards on the wall behind it, two filing cabinets.

Alongside the desk stood a king size fridge edging a small half-circle bar, complete with beer pumps and rows of bottles. Beside the lift door hung a dartboard with toe-line marked out on the floor. To the right of the lift stood a punch bag, a boxers speedball, an assortment of free weights, some Kendo swords on the wall, crash mats on the floor. Directly ahead a glass wall cut the room in half, two glass doors leading through to a gymnasium on the left and a small firing range on the right. The central feature of the room was a large circular sofa that had been laid out below a ceiling mounted TV screen.

Otto stepped forwards. 'Through that door on the left is the toilet and rest room with a bed and TV. Through that door on the right there is a sauna, Jacuzzi and steam room and lockers for clothes and equipment.'

'You're not such a bad wanker after all,' Johnno told Otto, maintaining a hostile stare. He wagged an accusing finger at Beesely. 'This is racial stereotyping, Boss. Not allowed in Barclays central!'

'I cannot claim any of the credit,' Beesely admitted with a shake of his head.

Johnno's expression highlighted his surprise as he studied Otto's neutral features. Otto tipped his head up to signify that Johnno should look behind. As Johnno half turned his head three buxom ladies in bikinis came out of the sauna area, soaking wet and shimmering.

Otto stepped closer to Johnno. Quietly he said, 'Sir Morris informed me of your lower back problem that persists from an old injury. These ladies are highly trained physiotherapists. After all, we need you in the best of health.'

Beesely stepped in the lift, Otto there a second later. Johnno was about to say something when the lift door closed with a 'ping'.

'Yep, not such a bad wanker after all,' Johnno repeated, easing off his jacket.

* * *

Dame Helen grew puzzled at what she was reading. It was not her area of interest, domestic policing and firearms, but she was puzzled. So far some three thousand firearms had been dumped at various police stations throughout the length and breadth of the kingdom, officers now standing vigil to see if they were next. And the street price of illegal weapons was soaring, putting them out of the reach of young hoodlums, she considered.

Six gun-dealers had been found dead, along with large stashes of weapons, and Scotland Yard's success rate in finding weapons had suddenly trebled with a ready supply of very accurate tip-offs. Rumour had it that one of the gun dealers had been found tied to a chair with a sign around his neck which said, 'Gun dealer, please arrest me, cell with a view!'

Worryingly, the number of kneecappings had risen dramatically in the capital, but at the moment it seemed gang related.

* * *

Concerned at the news items he had been viewing, Mr. Grey dialled the Virginia number again. 'Sir, there are some developments.'

'Problems?'

'Can't be a hundred percent sure, sir, but it looks like our friend has started taking out London gangsters and street-corner hoodlums. We've got some intercepts, not a clear picture. Also traffic has a definite link to him buying illegal firearms around the UK and then dumping them at police stations late at night.'

'Do you think he risks exposure?'

'No, sir. Brits don't have a clue as to who is behind it. News so far is favourable, British press loving it.'

'Keep an eye on it.'

4

'How is your ... *office*?' Beesely asked Johnno as they all sat down to eat.

The top floor restaurant would have put the best five-star hotel to shame; its panoramic views of the mountains alone guaranteeing a regular and loyal attendance. The imposing cliff-face offered a striking backdrop, now lit with yellow neon beams, its dark crest just visible against the twilight sky. To the west the sun was already behind the hills, but illuminating the distant clouds with a warm amber glow. Along the edge of the lake, lights from the road and from houses flickered, defining the shape of the black lake. A large pleasure-boat headed down the lake's centre, brightly illuminated.

'No windows,' Johno commented, avoiding eye contact and tucking into his double cheeseburger and chips.

'Never mind,' Jane offered as she picked at her tuna salad. 'Maybe they can find you something on a higher floor.'

Otto smiled at Beesely without her noticing.

'Has my guest arrived?' Beesely asked Otto.

'Ah, what?' Johno whinged. 'Are we working tonight?'

Beesely touched his arm. 'Just me and Otto, brief meeting, ten minutes.' He turned to Jane. 'And tomorrow, young lady, you and I are going to take a wander in that charming little town.'

She beamed back a huge smile, but clearly seemed tired.

'Have a long hot bath and early to bed,' Beesely suggested. 'Mountain air, it tires you out quickly.'

'Making me knackered!' Johno muttered. He looked up and faced Otto. 'Oh, while I think of it, select twenty of your best guys, send them on an all-night hike, tire them out, and I'll set a challenge for them twelve noon tomorrow. But make sure they *don't* get any sleep. Get me a couple of dozen bottles of beer, some whisky, notepad and paper, an atlas and a child's puzzle book, age range 11-13.'

Otto was intrigued, Beesely smiling widely.

* * *

Duncan Masters' head was spinning. 'Wow!' he said for the tenth time as they settled into a corner of the now deserted restaurant, Duncan staring out over the lake. He had been on the

grand tour with Otto and Beesely, wide eyed like a schoolboy visiting the cockpit of an airliner.

Duncan had worked for Beesely in previous years, making use of his position as a senior newspaper reporter by keeping his ear to the ground for any stories about the intelligence services about to break. He was now fifty, thin and pale.

‘So, how’s the family?’ Beesely asked as he poured tea for the three of them.

‘Kids are alright,’ Duncan affirmed, still glancing out of the window. ‘Both in university, don’t see much of them.’ Turning, his expression betrayed some sadness. ‘Gilly and I don’t talk. Probably divorce, you know.’ He took his tea. ‘I’m in a flat up in town.’

‘Yes, we know.’

Duncan did not seem surprised. ‘Well, in your game you’re supposed to know everything. Couldn’t believe that Learjet, seats that reach out and hug you. And no passport.’ He tapped his jacket pocket. ‘I still don’t have my passport. And this castle, Doctor No or what?’

Otto turned his head to Beesely, lifted his shoulders and held up his hands, a pained and questioning expression on his face. Beesely shook his head, almost unnoticeable, before placing a thick wad of fifties onto the table next to Duncan. ‘Get yourself a nice place.’

‘Good of you, Sir Morris.’

‘Listen, we need your help, old chap.’

Duncan pocketed the wad. ‘I never let you down before.’

‘But we are not Her Majesty’s Government any more. Granted, I still work closely with them, and we have the same vested interests, but this is private enterprise.’

‘That’s OK, same deal as before.’

Otto shot Beesely a quizzical look.

Beesely began, ‘What we need you to do is to expand your network of contacts and informants. And I mean really expand it. Put a wad like that into the hands of every paparazzi and trench coat you can find. Money, my boy, is no object.’

‘What we looking out for?’

‘Same as before: any story about to break about the intelligence services. Also foreign intelligence services, especially anything about me. Any stories about Switzerland, or general crime and intelligence matters in central Europe. Anyone sniffing around asking questions about me, or this place, and you push the panic button. Buy the story exclusive and bury it. Where you can – of course!’

‘We’ll give you an email address to send copies of articles to. But this must be subtle, Duncan, top-secret squirrel - my colleagues here do not piss about. If you get noticed or questioned, best not to upset these boys.’

Duncan glanced at Otto. ‘Never been noticed before, Sir Morris. Not going to start now.’

‘Good.’ Beesely handed Duncan an envelope. ‘In here are bank details and a credit card. That card has a ten thousand a day limit, and it will show up here every time you use it. Treat yourself, get a nice pad, some nice young ladies. Relax and enjoy life.’

‘Nice one, Sir Morris. Thanks. I was starting to be a bit down in life –’

‘My dear boy, if you weren’t then I would not be using you. Motivation is everything.’

‘I won’t let you down,’ Duncan repeated.

‘One more thing. I want you to find me an analyst, someone who can scan all the papers quickly and read between the lines, alert me if anything is brewing.’

Duncan gave it some careful thought. ‘There’s this one guy I know, Robert something, over at the Observer. Sharp as a tack.’

‘Does he have any particular ... hobbies or vices?’

‘Likes young girls.’

‘How young are we talking here?’ Beesely enquired.

‘Oh, not kids, eighteen to twenty.’

‘And he is?’

‘Forty-nine, fifty –’

‘And looks like?’

‘Oh, average. Spends his spare money in tacky London West End clubs splashing the cash.’

‘Perfect. Give him some money to spend when you see him next, see if he wants a new job. He would work from home in the UK, computer in the study, producing daily warnings of anything brewing, plus scanning for anything relating to a given list of topics, people and companies. You would feed him intel’ as well.’

‘No problem. This guy is sharp as hell, well connected too.’

‘Sounds like the makings of a deal.’

5

An hour later Otto found Beesely and Johno sitting in the grand bedroom and chatting. Beesely did not get up, his eyelids heavy to the point of closing.

Otto apologised, but Beesely waved him over. ‘The Czech operation was completed last night, I wanted you to see the photographs and the newspaper reports.’ He handed Beesely a brown file. Numerous black and white photographs of burnt-out buildings fell onto Beesely’s leg, grabbed by Johno. They reviewed a few of the images.

‘Nice work,’ Beesely commended. ‘No one hurt?’

‘Not that has been reported so far,’ Otto informed them. ‘The police have issued a warrant for the German owner. He was absent at the time, but they know it was arson and he is the best suspect.’

‘Good enough for ‘im!’ Johno said. Then, grabbing Beesely he said, ‘C’mon, you look like shit.’

Beesely accepted a hand up from Johno, who eased off his jacket, Otto assisting as Beesely wobbled on his feet.

‘Enough wine for you, young man,’ Johno playfully scolded.

‘Too much,’ Beesely agreed. He sat on the edge of the bed as Johno eased his shoes off, helping him lie down.

Johno tipped his head, signalling for Otto to follow him out to the corridor. They left the lights on, closing the door quietly. ‘When you’re that age it hits you quick,’ Johno reported from much experience of Beesely. ‘An hour from now he’ll be wide-

awake and pissing. Then he'll read for about for an hour, then go off to sleep. Old age breaks up your sleep cycle.' He patted Otto on the shoulder. 'Nothing to worry about.'

Otto nodded, clearly thinking about many things.

'C'mon,' Johno urged. 'Drink at my place.' They took the lift down, the young lift attendant now absent. 'Give my room up here to someone who needs it more,' Johno suggested as they entered the dungeon. 'Bed down here is snug and cosy.' He threw his jacket onto the central sofa. 'What's your poison?'

'Poison?' Otto repeated.

'Your favourite drink,' Johno carefully mouthed.

'Ah. Malibu and orange.'

Johno turned to stare at Otto, a controlled surprise at his taste in spirits. Then there it was, Malibu. It had not been there earlier. 'What the hell?' he muttered. He poured a large measure and threw in some orange. 'Try that.'

Otto sniffed it and took a sip. 'It is good.'

'So long as you're happy.' Johno grabbed several bottles of strong German lager and nudged his half-brother to the central sofa. 'Stick your arse down, bruv.'

'Bruv? You mean brother? Bruder?' Otto seemed pleased.

'Ja, du verstehst!'

They sat, Johno clinking Otto's glass with his bottle. 'Your good health.'

'Prost!' Otto offered.

Johno peered out from under tired eyelids. 'Prost!'

After a moment, Otto said, 'Johno, we have the best doctors in the world here in Switzerland, many private clinics where famous actors come for surgery. I can ... arrange anything you want, I know you still have pain.'

'Listen, mate, I know you mean well, but me and scalpels don't get on. When I was on that Yank aircraft carrier I woke up with a hundred tubes going into and out of every damn hole or patch of skin that wasn't already stitched up. If Ricky hadn't been sat there ... I would have freaked and lost it. At some point I went in for more surgery ... and I think that wanker of a doctor

didn't put me under right ... 'cos I could feel them cutting me and poking around.

'Then back in the UK I spent six months learning to pee and walk again. I shat liquid for three months, forgot what passing a turd was like. Took a while to walk, which is not easy on the old head when you are used to being fit. Verstanden?'

Otto nodded, a little saddened.

Johno swigged. 'So me and scalpels, not so hot.'

'If you ever change your mind, I will get for you the best doctors money can buy. And you will not feel anything.'

And over the next three hours Johno and Otto, half-brothers, played catch-up for more than forty years of lost time, Otto eventually dragging Johno to the small cot and putting him to bed.

* * *

Across the lake a pale and pockmarked Serb checked his telescope. The lights of the castle were clearly visible, cars coming and going. He turned away and started to check his supplies again.

He had already worked out how much he could consume each day to make it last; four days so far, six days to the event itself, then another seven days' wait before he could leave. It was odd, he told himself, but he was being paid well enough, enough to just sit and watch TV, eat and observe the castle.

Tiring of counting tins and packets he sat in front of the TV, quickly flicking to the German channel with game show contestants topless. He dropped his trousers.

A hard day at the office

1

Beesely's breakfast guest arrived as punctually as a Swiss Government Minister might be expected to. He proved to be the Interior Minister, responsible for police, the courts and security.

'Good to meet you,' Beesely offered, making a point of standing and walking around his desk as the minister entered, repeating the greeting in German and French.

Minister Blaum presented as a handsome figure; tall, slim and silver haired, his suit a sombre grey. 'I have heard much about you, Mister Beesely. Do I pronounce it correct?'

'Yes, excellent pronunciation. Please, do have a seat,' Beesely offered, an arm extended towards a chair.

The Minister took a seat, Otto sitting next to him.

'Would you like something? Tea, coffee, water?'

'Coffee would be fine. Thank you.'

'Otto?'

'Same, please.'

Beesely walked back around the large desk and sat, ordering three coffees in German via the intercom.

'You seem settled in, after only one day here,' Blaum noted.

'One day here, Minister, a lifetime in similar positions.'

The Minister nodded his understanding, but clearly seemed to be studying Beesely.

Beesely opened a file. 'Let me start, Minister, by informing you that I have secured provisional agreements from the Israelis, Americans and British *not* to carry out any intelligence operations on Swiss soil.'

The Minister turned to Otto for clarification. 'This is wonderful, but why would they agree to such a thing?'

'Negotiation, Minister. We will help them, they will help us, we will work together. They know me, and they know that I am a man of my word. I would also expect the French, Germans and Italians to make similar offerings within the next week.' Again

the Minister turned to Otto. Beesely added, 'The one problem area will be the Russians. But I will make some progress there.'

Coffee was served by two ladies in smart suits, interrupting the proceedings.

The Minister took longer than normal to stir his coffee. Finally he announced, 'We had many doubts about you, Sir Morris, after Herr Gunter's death. It was ... strange that you were the last member of the family and also from ... from the *background* you have.'

'A strange twist of fate indeed,' Beesely flatly stated, carefully studying the Minister.

Blaum stared back for several seconds. 'In all the time I knew Herr Gunter he never once stood to greet me, never offered me coffee, and he certainly never attempted to broker deals with people like the Israelis. You seem to have done more in one day than he did in ten years.'

'Well, more to the benefit of the Swiss Interior Minister at least.'

The Minister finally smiled. 'May I ask ... what your aim will be for K2? It is, after all, something we are closely involved with and ... having a *foreign national* here is a concern for some in the Government, police and military. As you can well imagine.'

'Yes, I can imagine. But no need to worry, Minister, you can pop down and chat any time you like. As for my aims ... I'm keen to see K2, and its resources, used to help in the fight against crime and terrorism in Europe, as it has already been used to some degree.'

'And would such actions attract ... newspaper interest?'

'I should hope not. From what I understand, K2 does not get caught or seen doing what it does. As discreet as a Swiss banker!'

The Minister laughed. 'You are becoming Swiss already.'

Beesely returned the smile. 'Now, I understand you are rather good at fly fishing.'

'It is hobby, when I have the time.'

'And you make all your own flies?'

'Of course.'

‘Excellent. I’ve cleared it with some of my contacts, and we can get you three days’ fishing on the Tay near Balmoral Castle in Scotland, when the Royal family is not in residence.’

‘Near Balmoral? You can arrange this?’

‘Already taken care of. Just let me know when you are free, and when it’s the right season, and we’ll fly you up there.’

‘Thank you.’

Ten minutes later Otto walked Minister Blaum out.

As the Minister reached his car he stopped, glancing back at the courtyard. ‘Do they suspect anything?’

‘No, Minister, nothing.’

The Minister nodded before easing into his car.

With the vehicle pulling away Otto muttered, ‘And neither do you, Minister.’

2

‘Monday morning meetings,’ Beesely thought aloud. ‘I used to both enjoy, and dread, these back at MI6.’ He studied the seating arrangement, slowly walking around his desk. ‘And you were going to sit ... where?’

The seats had been laid out in a half circle around Beesely’s desk, two deep so that the department head would be at the front, their deputy behind. Otto tapped the back of a chair facing the desk.

Beesely shook his head, stepped over and dragged Otto’s chair to the same side of the desk as his. ‘You’re command staff, *they* are subordinates.’

Otto appeared as if he was about to say something when the first of the department heads and his deputy walked in. Five minutes later they were all assembled. Beesely had stood in the doorway and greeted them all with a handshake, being last to sit down.

‘An auspicious occasion, ladies and gentlemen. The first meeting with my good self at the helm.’ He turned to Otto. ‘If I fall asleep, nudge me.’ The group laughed, quietly and politely.

So, first things first. I do not know who you all are, and I have no intention of wasting time today in trying to remember all your names and functions. That will come later.

‘Now, K2 is, at the moment, an organization that supports the bank’s investment activities, but also stands on its own two feet and earns *some money* directly. That figure, of around twenty-five percent, must grow. I would like to see that figure quantified in the following way. First, those monies that are generated by the bank as a *direct* result of K2 action we must quantify, as a way of proving the value of K2 as a department. We must then look at the direct earnings of security work. That figure I want to improve year-on-year by around ten percent.

‘Following talks with Otto, I will also begin to split K2 departments to a scale of risk and payment for service, so that simple security guard work is at the lower end of the scale, bodyguard work for rich clients in the middle and hostage rescue at the top. K2 actions in support of the bank will be a separate division. And I will cultivate relationships with the security agencies of the world so that we can support the high-risk client activities, such as kidnap and blackmail.

‘Right, my first priority this week is to quickly cement the relationships I have established with Mossad, the CIA and MI6. Meetings will be held next week with the Germans, French and Italians. Later in this meeting we shall address any problems or concerns you have, and then we can make some plans for the future. So, first we need something of interest to the western intelligence agencies.’ He held out his hands. There followed a moment’s silence as the assembled managers glanced at each other.

Finally a woman held up her pen. ‘We may have al-Qa’eda suspects,’ she offered with a soft French accent.

‘Excellent. What do we know about them?’

‘We intercepted and followed two Pakistani nationals when they took a bus from Rome to Paris a month ago. It took them through Switzerland, so we noticed them. Their passports were real, but not of themselves, they were passports of relatives. On the bus they did not sit next to each other or talk.’

‘Seems suspicious. Good, go on.’

‘We followed them to Paris. One travelled to Amsterdam a day after staying in the same hostel room together. After this they simply attended college studies for one month, so we stopped watching them. Resources were best used elsewhere.’

Beesely raised a finger. ‘That’s OK, but from now on I want any such persons, who may be of interest to the CIA, to be brought to my attention and resources dedicated to their surveillance. Are they still there? Paris and Amsterdam?’

The woman turned to her deputy, the man trotting quickly out. ‘We will know today, sir.’

‘Were the French and Dutch authorities warned?’

Otto leant forwards, catching Beesely’s attention. ‘In the past, that was not ... *our* policy.’

Beesely nodded his understanding.

The French-speaking manager offered, ‘I can get the files on these two men in one minute.’

Beesely swept a hand towards the door. ‘By all means.’ The relevant files were quickly retrieved, both opened onto his desk. ‘Ah, we have the credit card details of the chap in Paris, photocopied passports.’ He studied the passport stamps. ‘Crikey, they have Canadian visas!’ He handed the page to Otto. ‘When do they run out?’

Otto read the tiny, obscure print. ‘Three months remaining.’

‘Excellent, that gives me an idea. Oh, this credit card, we can hunt down its transactions?’

‘Yes, sir. We can call up its use,’ the same lady replied.

Beesely’s expression suggested she should do so, and she popped back out. He half turned to Otto. ‘Here’s the plan. We use this chap’s credit card to get him booked on a flight to ... Quebec, via London and Toronto, the other guy to join the flight via Amsterdam. Problem is, the minute they make the booking the CIA computer will be all over it.’ He rubbed his chin. ‘How long to make those flight bookings using this chap’s own credit card?’

‘Ten minutes maximum,’ Otto informed him with a puzzled look.

‘And to courier the tickets to his address?’

‘An hour.’

Beesely passed Otto the file. ‘OK, buy the tickets now and courier them to their homes. They will probably be out anyway.’

Otto stood, took the file and passed it to the second man sitting in the semi-circle. That man had already stood as Otto had accepted the file, now he walked briskly out.

‘I shall need to make a call.’ Beesely pressed CALL and then hit the SPEAKERPHONE button.

‘You want us to leave?’ Otto asked as several people started to stand.

‘No, no,’ Beesely waved them down. ‘Stay.’ Leaning into the phone, he said, ‘Could you get me Burke, CIA, London.’

The managers glanced at each other.

After a few moments came, ‘Burke here.’

‘Burke old chap, Beesely here, sorry to disturb you.’

‘No problem, got two minutes before some God damn admin’ meeting. What’s up?’

‘Discovered some al-Qa’eda chaps just about to board a flight for Toronto via London.’

‘Toronto? Bet they are heading for Niagara and the border.’

‘You’d know more about that stuff than me. Seems one of the team is coming from Paris, the other Amsterdam, meeting up at Heathrow and flying on together to Toronto today.’

‘Today!’

‘Well, it’s eight to ten hours to Toronto, so not to worry. Listen, we’ll be faxing the details across to you in the next few minutes.’

Otto pointed towards a man then slid his finger towards the door, the man bolting out.

‘Thanks Beesely. Owe ya one.’

‘My pleasure.’

Beesely made a further call. ‘Could you get me Dame Helen in London, please.’

‘Hello?’ came after just a few seconds.

‘Dame Helen, how good to hear your voice.’

‘Sir Morris, I’m ... kind of in the middle of something.’

‘Yes, piggy in the middle, I’m afraid.’

‘What?’ she snapped.

‘Well, we just got wind of two al-Qa’eda chaps heading for Toronto via London. They’ll be changing flights at Heathrow, having a sandwich, and a nice cup of traditional English tea no doubt, served by one of our traditional Polish waitresses.’

‘Why did you not alert us –’

‘My dear lady, I just received the information myself. And here I am, *alerting* you to it.’

‘Yes, of course. Sorry. When can we have the details?’

‘Well ... you’ll need to move quickly, their flight takes off in two or three hours. One chap is coming from Paris, the second from Amsterdam, both Pakistani nationals travelling on their cousins’ passports, changing at Heathrow for Canada. And, presumably, onto the wide open spaces of the US of A.’

‘You have their names? Passport numbers?’

‘I’m afraid the Yanks are not being as co-operative as they might. They ... are happy enough to let them pass through London unnoticed and pick them up in Toronto, then extradite them.’

The managers again glanced at each other.

‘We’ll see about that!’

‘Just a suggestion, Dame Helen, but if I were you I would just get them on the use of a friend’s passport, then see what happens after that. Let the Americans offer you something for them. Yes?’

‘You’re a crafty old sod, you know that?’

‘Coming from you that is high praise indeed. Call me late tonight with the final score.’ He took a breath and reset the phone. ‘Get me Elle Rosen, Mossad Section Chief, London.’

‘Hello?’ came after thirty seconds.

‘Is that you Elle? Beesely here.’

‘Yes, how are you?’

‘I’m fine ... for my age. Listen, to business. The Yanks and the Brits are in a flap over two Pakistani nationals flying through London today for Toronto, one from Paris and one from Amsterdam. If I were you I’d give this game a miss. Strictly

between you and me, I feel that they're trying to justify their budgets by finding poor Muslims to harass; the chaps they're focused on are small time. Looks as if they desire to work in the west, not blow it up. Sit back and watch the news.'

'Good to know. I'll let you know if something more interesting turns up.'

Elle held the phone above the receiver and stared across at his deputy. He let it fall. With a frown he said, 'That was Beesely, tipping us off about potential al-Qa'eda suspects passing through London.'

His deputy puzzled the situation. 'He must know ... that we know who he really is.'

'For sure. I guess we play his game, pretending we don't know.'

Elle's deputy pointed towards the phone. 'So that the Swiss people don't know?'

Elle shrugged and nodded at the same time.

Beesely pressed the END button. He took a big breath. 'Right, let's execute plan 'A', then coffee and a walk around the park before we start again.'

'Sir?' a manager called. 'These men will not get on the flights, for sure.'

'I know,' Beesely informed him with a confident grin. 'And the various agencies will blame each other for scaring off this hopeless pair. We do not need them on the flight, we just need the *idea* of them on that flight in the hands of western intelligence. That way we have done our job, not our fault they did not board. And ... with a bit of luck, both the Brits and the Yanks will play hell with the French, who are due here next week for a chat.'

'Le fox,' a man muttered a bit too loud, and an odd mix of English and French.

Beesely smiled. 'A compliment if ever I heard one, in both languages.'

Johno rested an elbow on the desk, a hand supporting his head, looking hung over.

‘Sir, you had an appointment at 7.15am this morning,’ the Swiss doctor delicately explained.

‘Not a morning person,’ Johno replied, looking tired.

‘Not ... a morning person?’ the doctor slowly repeated, glancing at his colleagues with a heavy frown. He put a large cross on a form in front of him, took a breath and presented Johno with a multi-part medical questionnaire. Then, as an afterthought, placed down a pen when Johno just stared back at him.

Johno tested the pen by scribbling in the top corner of the questionnaire, causing a sharp intake of breath from the medic. He began ticking boxes, keenly observed by three of the bank’s doctors. After ten questions read Johno had ticked six.

‘Sir?’

Johno lifted his eyes, his head still on his elbow.

The medic delicately asked, ‘Do you understand the questions, sir?’

Johno glanced at the paper, then stared back at the doctor. ‘Yep. It *is* ... in English.’

‘It’s just ... that you seem to have ticked some boxes?’

‘That’s what they’re there for, aren’t they?’ He carried on down the list, managing to tick fourteen of the thirty questions on the first page.

‘Sir?’ the first doctor interrupted, Johno lifting his eyes. ‘It’s just that ... normally no one is allowed to work for the bank if they tick *any* of the boxes.’

‘Really?’ Johno made a face. ‘Must be a healthy bunch of fuckers.’

The second doctor walked around and glanced over Johno’s shoulder. ‘Sir,’ he said, placing a finger next to a box. ‘Have you had ... *that*?’

‘Twice,’ Johno replied.

‘And these others?’ the doctor pressed.

‘Yep.’

‘That seems ... unlikely, sir.’

Johnno slowly stood and took off his jacket. ‘I appreciate I’m new here, so I’ll give you *the talk* ... just once.’ As he unbuttoned his shirt he said, ‘I was a soldier in the British Parachute Regiment, SAS, then worked undercover for ten years for British Intelligence. I’ve spent time in the desert, the jungle and the black hole of Calcutta.’

He eased off his shirt. ‘Twenty-eight years ... of doing stuff I probably shouldn’t have.’ The doctors stared at his torso, wide eyed. ‘I’ve been shot seven times, two are still in there ... somewhere. Stabbed, burnt, garrotted, beaten, and I’ve shat out some dodgy curries. Chain smoker, chronic alcoholic ... and I sometimes cross the road without looking.’ He waited as they stared. ‘Any ... questions?’ he carefully mouthed.

Next came the psychological examination, Johnno on his third coffee, the second ordered at gunpoint.

‘Sir,’ the lead psychologist asked. ‘How do you see yourself... within K2?’

‘Well, I kind of see myself ... like a male lion.’

‘A “male” lion?’ the second psychiatrist queried.

‘Yeah, a male lion.’

‘But, sir, a lion is ... a male.’

‘Really?’ Johnno gave it some thought. ‘So what’s a female lion?’

‘A lioness, sir.’

‘That don’t seem fair.’

‘Fair ... sir?’

‘Yeah. How come a male lion doesn’t have a decent name. A male elephant is a “bull” elephant, yes?’ They nodded. ‘And a male cow is a “bull”, yeah?’

‘Sir, you can’t say ... a male cow. A cow is female, a bull male.’

‘I know that. But when you see lions, you say ... see those lions over there. Yeah?’ The psychiatrists eventually agreed. ‘So *lions* is the collective name for ... you know, lions and *lionesses*. Which ain’t fair, because the lion is king of the jungle.’

‘Not fair?’ a psychiatrist repeated.

‘Yeah. A male deer is a “stag”, a great name for a male deer. It suggests strength and power.’ The psychiatrists glanced at each other and took notes. ‘But the poor old male lion is just a lion. I mean, who thinks up these names?’ He sipped his coffee. ‘Fucking Darwin.’

‘So, sir ... how do you see yourself ... within K2?’ the first psychiatrist pressed.

‘Like I said, like a male lion.’ They waited. Johnno explained, ‘Your male lion, he sleeps around all day, eating and shagging –’

‘Shagging?’ they queried.

‘Shagging the lionesses.’ They seemed to understand. Johnno continued, ‘But then once a month or so he’s got to fight the lions of the neighbouring turf, and he risks his life. Once he’s fought off the neighbours he goes back and shags the lionesses, has a bite to eat and falls asleep till he’s needed again.’

The psychiatrists collectively sighed.

‘Sir, tell us ... how you view women.’

Johnno grinned.

* * *

Johnno walked into Beesely’s office holding his satellite phone as the managers trailed out, his expression suggesting trouble. ‘Got a problem,’ he stated. Approaching Beesely and Otto, he waited for the others to leave. ‘Max at AGN Security in the UK just called, says he’s being followed.’

‘Is he sure?’ Beesely queried, a sceptical look.

‘Yep. Professionals.’

They both quizzed Otto with their looks.

‘It is not our people,’ Otto insisted.

‘But we are keeping an eye on Max?’ Beesely prompted.

‘Certainly. As soon as we entered into business we set up a camera outside his office and outside his home and a satellite tracker on his car.’

‘You do know he’s on our side?’ Johnno sarcastically nudged.

‘Of course. We are there for his protection, and to see who he is doing business with,’ Otto explained.

Beesely rubbed the bridge of his nose. ‘Find out who is following him, please.’

Otto turned and left.

Johno closed in. ‘What d’ya reckon?’

‘Could be MI5, I doubt it’s Dame Helen. I’ve heard that the head of Five is a bit of a handful. I think ... I think I will need to do some digging there.’

Johno turned, about to leave, when Beesely called, ‘Oh, Johno?’ Johno stopped and turned back. ‘We had the result of your medical back,’ Beesely said, trying not to smile.

‘And? Am I still alive?’

‘According to medical science ... no. Did you *enjoy* shocking them?’ Johno grinned, but made no comment. ‘The psych’ evaluation was ... *interesting*, in their assessment of you. Did you answer the questions truthfully, or according to that document you have – *How to fuck up a psychiatrist?*’

Johno grinned. ‘From the book. I memorised the answers, the ones that are supposed to make you come across as a psychotic. I dragged the thing about lions out for ages.’

Beesely took a breath. ‘I believe that Otto *deliberately* did not warn them about you.’

‘He has a hidden sense of humour,’ Johno agreed. ‘Hence the dungeon.’

‘What did you say to the psychiatrists about women? Otto said it had them going.’

Johno smiled. ‘Women are like mobile phones. You’ve got your “pre-pay”, and you’ve got your “contract”. With pre-pay you know exactly what it costs you and, more importantly, how long it will last. With your contract you never really know how much it will cost ... and the money disappears from your account every month whether you like it or not!’

Beesely shook his head. ‘Was that from the book?’

‘No, mate texted it to me a few days ago.’

Beesely let out a resigned sigh. ‘Go and play nice with the other children.’

The day was glorious, the view of the lake breathtaking. Jane was well wrapped up and Beesely had kept his jacket on against the cool breeze off the lake.

A hundred yards down from the castle they had found a park with freshly mown grass, paths made from wood chippings, benches facing the lake. They could see the lakeside road and a dozen traditional wooden cottages dotted along it. The large pleasure boat had sounded its horn five minutes earlier and now came into view.

‘Another egg?’ Jane asked.

‘Thanks.’ Beesely set about peeling the hardboiled egg.

‘How’s it all going?’ she casually enquired without looking up.

‘Fine, fine,’ he answered. Then, after a moment’s thought he added, ‘A lot of it in German and French. Bit rusty, but getting by.’

‘I’d be lost. Don’t remember any German from school.’

‘Not to worry, Otto does a lot of translating.’

‘Where’s Johnno?’

‘God knows,’ Beesely grumbled.

‘Haven’t seen him much. Must be like a kid in a toy shop.’

‘Yes, certainly lots for him to do here.’ He studied the back of her head. ‘Do you ... miss the old house?’

Now she turned around. ‘Oh, no, don’t get me wrong, here’s lovely and we’re used to travelling and all-’

‘But?’

‘Well ... I just don’t know what I’m supposed to be doing. You’re busy and Johnno will be busy.’

‘We always eat together.’

‘Yes ... I know that.’ She let her gaze wander over the lake.

‘Do you want a job?’ he delicately enquired.

‘Well ... I want to do something to help. Don’t know what, mind you.’

He studied the back of her head, gently nodding. 'Let me talk with Otto, and we'll see what a woman of your talents can help us with. Yes?'

She laughed, noticing Otto and Johnno walking down, chatting together. Johnno sat down and pinched Beesely's freshly peeled egg, gulping it down.

'Strange news,' Otto reported with a smile. 'They are taking the flights.'

'Sorry?' Beesely puzzled.

'The two Pakistani nationals, they are taking the flights,' Otto explained, clearly amused.

Johnno tried to laugh and chew at the same time, Beesely scowling at him.

Otto explained, 'We bought the aeroplane tickets, and they were emailed to the two men by the airline, no need to be sent by courier; we had already intercepted the men's email accounts. Twenty minutes later they got into taxis for the airport. They are at check-in.'

Beesely stared out over the lake, frowning heavily before turning back to Otto. 'They're taking the flights?'

Jane glanced from one face to the other, not a clue as to what was going on.

'They're taking the flights!' Beesely repeated, Johnno struggling with the egg and the humour.

'They took the damn flights!' Johnno stated, spraying egg over himself.

'Why the hell would these two poor stupid farmers' boys get on flights sent to them in an email?' Beesely puzzled.

'Maybe that is what they were waiting for,' Otto suggested. 'A secret travel plan sent to them.'

'Jesus,' Beesely finally let out. 'Well, that doesn't change anything, works in our favour. Poor fools.' He blew out. 'If only they knew what lay ahead for them.'

'They must be terrorists,' Otto insisted. 'Who else drops everything and gets on a plane to go half way around the world on a fake passport?'

Johnno pointed a finger towards him. 'He's got a point.'

Beesely sighed. 'Best stir the pooh then.' He stood and wandered down the slope, taking out his phone. 'Dame Helen, please.'

After a moment came, 'Hello?'

'Beesely here.'

'Ah, we found the details of that pair, only two Pakistani nationals flying on to Toronto today. Looks like fake passports, the real passport holders are in prison in Islamabad.'

'I have some news, my dear ... Condition Black. Canadian Air Force get their tip-off from the Yanks ... in an hour.'

Dame Helen paused. 'Are you sure?'

'Can you afford to take the chance? And can you afford me to *know* you took the chance? Might be best to divert the flights, perhaps to RAF Brize Norton, just to be sure.'

'Christ,' she quietly cursed. 'Anything further on them?'

'When I know, you will know.' He hung up.

'Elle, twice in one day. Listen, I think someone has been keeping us in the dark. Looks as if these two farm boys are not so stupid after all. RAF has planes in the air!'

'Really?'

'Worth you digging through their background.'

'Yes, certainly. Thanks again.'

'Burke, Beesely here.'

'Kinda busy right about now —' came back.

'Don't care. Listen well, Brits have fighters in the air.'

'What?' Burke puzzled.

'They're going to intercept those flights. Seems our little fish are better connected than anyone thought. Bit of a coup for MI6, at least that's the way the papers will see it.'

'Like hell! I sent an official warning to your government a few hours back, already asked for these two fellas.'

'Well, you may have a fight on your hands. Seems they are big fish after all. I'll let you know if I find anything new.'

'Thanks Beesely, you're a stand up guy.' He hung up.

Beesely pressed the red button. 'Huh,' he grunted.

Rejoining the picnic, Beesely got taken to one side by Otto. 'We will have to discuss the Serbian problem.'

'Serbian ... problem?'

'Gunter made enemies there. They are trying to get what information they can about K2.'

'Oh dear.'

'They mean to make trouble,' Otto suggested with a concerned look.

'Are we talking about the Serbian Government, or private enterprise?'

'They are connected.'

Beesely took in the view. 'Then what I would like ... is for the Swiss Government to officially invite the head of Serbian Intelligence, plus the principal players on the private side, here for a chat. Around Friday would be good.'

Otto stood surprised, if not mildly stunned. 'I ... will talk with the Government, but it will not be so easy.'

Beesely made eye contact. 'Worthwhile things never are.' He added, 'The problem with the Serbs, is that half the country wishes to join The West, the rest wish to lynch us for what we did in Bosnia and Kosovo. A delicate balance, love and hate in equal measure. Must be a bit like being married.'

They sat and chatted for half an hour, enjoying the view, the sun beating down and warming them, ties loosened.

Johno's phone rang. Otto and Beesely turned, their interest piqued since Johno did not make or receive many calls on the satellite phone. After much nodding and 'yeah ... sweet ... wankers', he hung up. 'That was the boys from Hereford, well chuffed about the gifts. Seems they're off to RAF Brize Norton to storm a plane.'

Beesely offered him a quizzical look. 'Really? Can't think why.'

* * *

On a random tour of camp buildings Johno wandered into the guard commander's single-storey building, correctly reading the German title above the door. The senior men, dressed in black fatigues, stood as he entered.

'No need for you fuckers to stand when I walk in - I'm no officer, I work for a living!' He took in the room, the clipboards pinned to walls, the desks and chairs, a paper man-sized target fixed to one wall.

Simon, a guard commander stepped forwards. 'We have orders from Herr Otto, sir. You are to be treated as a senior manager.'

'Really?' Johno unhappily reflected. 'So ... you have to do what I say?'

'Yes, sir.'

'OK. Stand on one foot.'

Simon glanced at his colleagues before standing on one foot.

'Now flap your arms like a chicken and make clucking noises.'

Some of the men smiled. Simon lowered his leg, not looking pleased. 'I believe, sir, that you are making a joke at me.'

'And you'd be right.' Johno put a cigarette on his lip. He stopped short of lighting it. 'Is smoking allowed in here?'

'No, sir,' Simon informed him.

'Then I'm changing the rules. You're now all allowed to smoke in here. And I'll shoot the next person to call me *sir*. I'm a soldier, a driver and a bodyguard.' Men glanced at each other. 'And ... a drunken womaniser,' he lightly added.

The men smiled.

Johno pointed at a man's holstered pistol. 'You know how to use that, sonny?'

'Yes,' the man confidently replied. 'Do you?'

Johno had his pistol in his hand a second later, bringing it level with the man's head. The man ducked, Johno firing past him at the paper target fixed to the wall. When the shooting stopped, men lifted up in stunned silence and turned to the target. Johno had put a "smiley face" into the target's chest, ten rounds.

Several of the guard commanders stepped towards it, inspecting his handiwork.

Johno holstered his pistol. 'How'd I do? Passable by your standards?' He lit his cigarette.

The men closest to the target stood admiring the speed and accuracy of Johno's work. The man who had ducked was breathing heavily, looking horrified.

Simon stepped to Johno, but focused on the target. 'We are not allowed to carry our weapons cocked with the safety off – as you do.' He shrugged. 'Safety rules.'

'And good rules they are,' Johno agreed. 'Stop you shooting yourselves in the foot. I once drew my weapon quickly and shot the tire of my own vehicle.' He kicked out a chair and sat. 'Sit down, gentlemen. That's a order.' He cleared his weapon, reloaded, but did not cock the weapon. He set 'safety' on, displayed the weapon's setting for them to see, then holstered it.

'Tell us about Kosovo,' a man called. The remainder closed in, keenly attentive.

An hour later Johno sat behind a fold-down table in a field of mown grass east of the camp. Two senior administrators sat next to him at similar tables; pens and paper, quiz books and booze ready. The selected twenty guards were running around the field, having been out all night.

Johno blew a whistle, directing the men across and telling them to line up. A dozen other guards observed, a few managers taking notes. Otto had just arrived, walking slowly with his hands clasped behind his back and taking in the scene.

Johno waved the first guard forwards, pouring him a drink of beer in a plastic glass. 'Drink it all.'

The guard hesitated, glanced at the managers present, then at Otto before drinking the beer as requested.

'Back of the queue,' Johno told him, waving him off. He repeated the exercise till the first man was in front of his table again. 'Twenty press-ups.' The man dropped and did twenty press-ups. 'Good.' Johno gave him another beer then repeated

the exercise for the next nineteen perplexed guards. Soon the first man presented himself again.

‘Capital of Wales?’

‘Wales?’

‘You’ve lost a point, twenty press-ups, then a beer. Next!’

The next guard stepped forwards. ‘Capital of Scotland?’

‘Edinburgh.’

‘Good, back of the queue. Next.’ Johno worked his way through the entire line, eight guards drinking a beer.

The first man returned as Johno read from the puzzle book. ‘How many English pounds in one kilo?’

‘Two and a half?’

‘Er ... two point two. Have a mouthful of beer and five press-ups.’ Five minutes later the same man was back. ‘Capital of Iran?’

‘Baghdad?’

‘No, fuck head! Beer and thirty press-ups!’ Eight minutes later the same man stepped up, looking exhausted.

‘What is ... nine times eight?’ Johno asked the man, his head in the book, a finger over the answer.

The guard had to stop and think. ‘Seventy ... six?’

Johno grinned up at the man. ‘Nope, beer and thirty press-ups.’ Ten minutes passed before the first guard was back again. With a cheeky grin, Johno poured him a large whisky.

‘Mein Gott,’ the man muttered before swigging the whisky, his eyes now showing the strain, the effects of alcohol on a tired body. Ten minutes later he returned, unsteady on his feet.

‘How many rounds maximum in a Browning 9mm pistol?’

The guard squinted at Johno. ‘Thirteen?’

‘Good. Have a beer, then twenty press-ups.’ The press-ups were laboured, several burps issued, but he got through. By the time he re-appeared he was wobbling. Smirking, Johno lifted an MP5 sub-machinegun onto the table. ‘Make safe. Quickly!’ He threw a stun grenade at the back of the queue. ‘Grenade!’ They dived out of the way. ‘Line up you fuckers!’

The MP5 was made safe.

‘Slow, but OK. Run once around the field.’

Fifteen minutes later the same man presented himself in front of the table, sweating profusely and panting heavily, Otto sat close and keenly taking notes.

‘Take a drink.’ Johno handed the man a whisky. ‘What is ... normal flight time from London to ... the Bahamas?’

‘Flight ... time?’ the man repeated.

‘Too slow, take a sip of beer.’ The man took a sip. ‘Assemble the weapon ready to fire.’ Johno directed, pointing at an MP5 on the next table. The man got to work, struggling to focus.

Johno threw a stun grenade. ‘Grenade!’ A guard angrily kicked it away. ‘Otto! Get that fucker off the field, I want his name.’

The rest of the guards slowly scrambled back onto their feet and lined up as Otto sat back down.

Johno explained, ‘You can tell a lot about how someone will work under pressure through an exercise like this. Aggression is good, but it has to be focused, part of the task. They need to focus the anger on the job in hand, not each other or their bosses.’

‘I understand,’ Otto suggested.

‘We can’t take this lot to war and test them, so we have to do what we can here.’

‘Finished,’ the man assembling the MP5 said, stood to attention.

‘Good. Next!’

Twenty minutes later the men were suffering, one more thrown off the field.

‘Now we see,’ Johno said with a wink as he stood and approached the line of men, Otto following him. ‘Get into groups of three!’

It took a few seconds, but they did so, one odd group of two left over. Johno pointed at a guard and told him to join them. ‘OK, one man is injured, two must carry him around the field. Fresh guard, you are the injured man. Go! Quick!’

Five minutes later one guard punched another, taken off the field, as was the man he hit. Groups reformed.

Johno laughed at them as they struggled along like a bunch of drunks. 'Otto, those taken off, don't punish them, just note them down for more pressure training. People react in different ways when they're drunk, not like when they're in combat.'

Otto nodded. One team fell and could not be bothered to get back up. They were sent off, their names noted.

Johno threw a stun grenade. 'Grenade!'

Two groups laid down their injured man quickly, one threw down the injured man and several just collapsed in a heap, several being sent off.

'Get up!' They began again. 'In-coming!'

They ducked down, one group very slowly and getting themselves kicked off the field.

'Everyone to the tables! C'mon, move it.'

The remaining six stood in front of the tables. Each took a beer.

'Make safe the weapon in front!'

They grabbed the MP5s laid out for them. Bang! A blank round got accidentally fired.

'Idiot! Send him off!' Now just five remained. 'Make ready your weapons, safety off.' They did as they were asked. 'Lie down. Crawl ten yards.'

Bang!

'Get that fucker off the field!' Johno barked, the man being removed.

The last four crawled ten yards, turned and crawled back and stood.

Johno faced Otto. 'OK, when my arse is in trouble I want these four right next to me. Understand?'

Otto smiled as Johno shook hands with each exhausted man.

'Made me hungry all this exercise has,' Johno said, patting his stomach. They stepped away together.

'I have ordered a replacement fridge for you,' Otto reported.

'The one on the dungeon not working proper?'

'No, *that one* ... is fine,' Otto flatly stated. 'It was the tall fridge in the guard commanders building – the other side of the

wall to the target you fired at. The men sat in the room thought they were under attack.'

Johnno stopped and faced Otto, a mildly concerned look. 'Sorry, Boss. Am I in trouble now?'

'No, of course not,' Otto said with a grin as they continued on their course. 'You did what Beesely thought you would do. You did, apparently ... scent mark your territory. You peed on your spot.'

Johnno laughed as they walked on.

The quarter final of the African League football competition was about to start. Both teams stood lined up with the referee and the two linesmen.

The national anthem of Sierra Leone had already been played, its players stood proudly with their heads held high and their chests out. Now it came the turn of Zimbabwe, playing on home turf, their President in the stand.

'Stick ... a ... chicken in the air, stick a deckchair up your nose, buy a jumbo jet and then bury all your clothes...' blasted out of the speakers.

Without realising it, the Zimbabwean President was tapping his foot to the music.

4

Johnno had selected Sky News on his large plasma television, Otto sat next to him with a beer. The lift opened with a 'ping'.

Otto glanced around as Beesely approached. 'How was the shopping? Jane is good, yes?'

Beesely nodded as he approached, hands clasped behind his back.

Johnno shouted, 'Shut up, here it is.'

Beesely stood behind Johnno, who passed up a bottle without taking his gaze off the large screen built into the ceiling.

SKY NEWS ON THE HOUR. THIS JUST IN. ROYAL AIR FORCE JETS TODAY INTERCEPTED TWO FLIGHTS FROM EUROPE, ONE FROM PARIS AND ONE FROM AMSTERDAM. BOTH OF THOSE COUNTRIES' GOVERNMENTS HAVE LAUNCHED OFFICIAL COMPLAINTS, AS HAS THE HEAD OF THE EUROPEAN UNION -

'Wankers!' Johno shouted.

THE JETS WERE FORCED TO LAND AT RAF BRIZE NORTON, WHERE THEY WERE MET BY ARMED POLICE AND SAS COUNTER-TERRORIST TEAMS -

'Go boys!'

- WHO BOARDED THE FLIGHTS. PASSENGERS WERE SAID TO BE TERRIFIED, BUT GRATEFUL THAT THEY DID NOT FLY ACROSS THE ATLANTIC WITH TWO POTENTIAL HIJACKERS ON BOARD.

Beesely sat down.

THE HOME SECRETARY HAD THIS TO SAY A SHORT WHILE AGO: THE FRENCH AND DUTCH GOVERNMENTS ARE IN NO POSITION TO CRITICISE THE BRITISH POLICE AND INTELLIGENCE SERVICES, NOR OUR GLORIOUS ARMED FORCES IN THIS ACTION TODAY. THESE PAKISTANI NATIONALS WERE STAYING IN THOSE COUNTRIES USING FALSE PASSPORTS, HAVING FIRST ENTERED ILLEGALLY - OTHERWISE WE WOULD NOT BE IN THIS SITUATION. WE SHALL BE MAKING COMPLAINTS AT THE HIGHEST LEVELS TO THESE GOVERNMENTS. WE SHALL ALSO BE ASKING QUESTIONS OF THE ITALIANS AS TO HOW, IN THIS DAY AND AGE OF TERROR, THIS PAIR MANAGED TO ENTER ITALY ON FAKE PASSPORTS. IF THE FRENCH INTERIOR MINISTRY WAS NOT HALF ASLEEP -

'Oooh, that's going to hurt in the morning,' Johno suggested.

'Well,' Beesely began, 'if you're going to piss-off your European partners, then you may as well do them all at once.'

The news continued, pictures of RAF jets, armed police, political comment. They watched the whole story at least three times over.

Beesely's phone rang, surprising him. He held it up for Otto to see. 'This thing works down here?'

Otto explained, 'There are signal relays inside most of the rooms, but the signal is not one hundred percent.'

Beesely pressed the phone's green button. 'Beesely here.'

'Dame Helen for you, sir,' came a professional female voice.

'Put her through ... Dame Helen? Not still at work I hope. Busy day?'

'Like a mad house. Europeans going crazy, Americans not happy, two meetings with the Minister.'

'Sounds hectic. I was just relaxing with a beer.'

'That sounds much better than my agenda for the next few hours.'

'Oh dear. Be home late?'

'No, be staying up in town.'

'So, how are things panning out today?'

'They confessed.'

'They confessed?' Beesely kicked Otto's leg then tapped Johnno with his beer bottle.

'Yes. Seems they changed their minds about martyrdom.'

'What was their plan?' Beesely enquired.

'Meet a contact in Canada, didn't know who. After that they would be briefed.'

'Sounds about right. They would not be briefed until ready to do the job, al-Qa'eda realises now that phones and emails are not secure.'

'Anyway, thanks. I mentioned you to the Minister.'

'No need, you take the glory. I'm not looking for any merit badges. But there is one thing I might ask for as a favour.'

'What's that?' she nervously enquired.

'The head of MI5, what's he like?'

'Rawlins? God, don't get me started on *him*.'

'Not much of a charmer I hear.'

'Likes conflict, likes to rub people up the wrong way. Not popular amongst his own staff. I've always found him difficult, so does the Minister.'

'You have anyone ... inside?' Beesely delicately broached.

'You might think that, I could not possibly comment,' rolled off her tongue.

‘Well, not to worry for the moment, but I might end up going toe-to-toe with him. Depends on whether or not he upsets some friends of mine.’

‘Rumour has it he has some vices,’ she informed him.

‘Oh dear. They do have a nasty habit of slipping out.’

‘Don’t forget my ring side seat.’

‘Will do. Don’t work too hard now. Bye, bye.’

‘One more thing,’ she called. ‘If you should happen to come across *whoever* is dumping illegal weapons at UK police stations, tell that individual that there are some senior figures in the British establishment who are rather delighted with the way things are going. Concerned, but delighted. Lots of favours being accrued.’

‘I’ll pass it along ... should I come across such a person.’ Beesely pressed Red followed by Green. ‘Beesely here. I want to find out everything we can about the head of MI5, Rawlins his name is, especially his private life. I want your best agents to discreetly monitor his activities outside of work, but they must be very careful. He is, after all, the head of British Intelligence. Thanks.’

‘Do you think he is dirty?’ Otto asked.

Beesely made a face, suggesting he did not know or care either way.

* * *

Mr. Grey selected a recently dialled number. ‘Didn’t wake you, did I, sir?’

‘I was having a pee,’ came the whispered reply from Oliver Stanton, Chairman of The Lodge. ‘It was on silent, but I saw the light.’

‘Thought you might be up playing with the puppies. Bertha had what ... four?’

‘How did you know?’ Stanton whispered.

‘Sally texted me after the first one popped out. How are they?’

‘She’s asleep in the snug with them.’

‘Going to need to find some more homes for them. Third time now?’

‘Going to have her fixed!’ They laughed. ‘What’s new from across the pond?’

‘Beesely tipped off the local CIA about two al-Qa’eda suspects, Brits grabbed them. I think he tipped *them* off as well, playing one against the other,’ Mr. Grey explained.

‘You may not see the pattern, but this spider is spinning an intricate web. I’ll explain it at some point. He’s working undercover. Again.’

‘He’s got me confused, sir,’ Mr. Grey admitted.

‘You need to understand the history. Some pieces of the puzzle you don’t have. So ... you want a puppy?’

‘Not fucking likely, sir.’ They laughed.

‘Night.’

5

Johno ambled into Beesely’s office a few hours later. ‘Got some dirt on Rawlins at MI5.’

Beesely put down his old fountain pen. ‘Really?’

‘Well, not really dirt as such. Seems he used to frequent late night gambling dens, now does it all on-line.’

‘Debts?’

Johno grimaced. ‘Not really. Spent six grand this year, lost it.’

Beesely considered it. ‘Still, out of his salary it’s a chunk.’

‘Had an idea.’

Beesely eased back, amused. ‘Go on.’

‘Mate I know does the same thing, on-line poker. The people you play poker against are just numbers, like Roger-26, all anonymous. So if we signed up some dodgy foreign terrorist to the on-line site and –’

‘Rawlins won money off him ...’ Beesely finished off.

Johno grinned. ‘It would look bad if the papers found out.’

‘Not as stupid as you look, are you.’ Beesely put his glasses back on. ‘Your project, go supervise. Practise being a sneaky little shit.’

Johno headed from the door. ‘I learnt from the best.’

‘I heard that! Oh, by the way, Johno....’

Johno came back in as Beesely thrust a credit card towards him. Inspecting it Johno asked coyly, ‘My own little expense account?’

‘According to Otto that credit card gives you the power of God around here.’ Beesely tipped his head, a slight grin forming. ‘I’d be interested to see how the locals react to it. Field test it as only *you* could.’

‘Talking of testing things,’ Johno began as he took out his satellite phone. He pressed the green button. ‘This is Johno. Put me through to the UK Alzheimer’s Association.’

‘Johno,’ Beesely quietly admonished.

‘Hello?’ came a female voice.

‘Who’s that?’ Johno asked.

‘Who am I? This is the Alzheimer’s Association. How may I direct your call?’

‘Why are you ringing me?’ Johno enquired, a smile creased into one cheek, Beesely shaking his head.

‘I’m sorry? You rang us, sir.’

‘Did I? Why did I do that?’

‘Are you OK, sir?’

‘Yes.’ He waited. ‘Who’s that?’

A sigh could be heard from the other end. ‘This is the Alzheimer’s Association. Are you the gentleman I spoke to before?’

‘Yes. Who’s that?’

* * *

The chairman of the Virginia lodge read the detail of a file as the others sat waiting. Finally he raised his head. ‘He’s building up contacts and favours in the world’s intelligence community. But instead of coming directly to us, he’s making it appear that he is

him, not *him* one of us - if that makes sense. Planting a lie within a lie. It's also a clear message to us.'

'How so?' a man asked.

'He could have come to us and we would have ordered the CIA to assist him. Instead, his actions were bound to draw our attention by doing it this way. Some private joke if I know him.'

'His actions seem a bit ... eccentric,' a man ventured.

'You ever met him?' the chairman asked, a rhetorical question. 'He invented eccentric. The naked ladies, the bird nesting boxes - he's poking fun at various people. He also seems to be playing a part, as if someone else was watching him.'

'Who might be watching him?' a man asked.

The chairman smiled. 'K2 is Swiss, they're based in Switzerland. Who else, based in Switzerland, might be watching him?' He waited, opening the palms of his hands.

Several faces creased into smiles. Henry nodded to himself.

The family silver

1

The next morning a helicopter flew Beesely, Otto and Johnno the short distance up to Zurich as Jane accompanied decorators around the castle.

Johnno asked a lot of intelligent questions of the pilot, sitting up front and studying the controls of this French-made Squirrel helicopter. Approaching the southern tip of Lake Zurich, the pilot allowed Johnno to take control, a seamless transfer. Concerned, Otto leant forwards and glanced over Johnno's shoulder, but Beesely reassured him of his half-brother's abilities.

They flew north, skirted the western edge of the lake, densely populated and with houses sprawling up the hillside, but cut by an ugly elevated highway running north to south. At the northern edge of the lake they arced slowly over the city centre buildings, the commercial centre of the city in view, before turning south parallel to the eastern lakeshore, the area more urban and with many red roofs poking through the trees. Doubling back around mid-lake they slowly circled over a ferry for close inspection, heading back up the east lakeside and around the eastern edges of the city towards the airport in the north. Otto pointed out many places of interest, and many buildings and businesses that the group owned. Landing at the airport's helipad, they were met by a convoy of three Range Rovers.

Outside of the airport, they joined the highway south for a quick journey to the small city. In no particular hurry, they drove past the park and the university before heading west and through the shabby end of town, past a large railway marshalling yard. Doubling back, they passed through the shopping district and back across the river to the east to view several banking group buildings before again meandering yet again across the river to the west side, where the bank's headquarters were located.

The bank's main building was a twelve-storey, glass-fronted office block situated a quarter mile north of the lake, only

glimpsed from within the vehicles. They drove into an underground car park, getting the lift to the top floor. The whole of the top floor was open plan, the lift and stairs a strong central feature that interrupted a completely panoramic view. The bank's CEO, Mathius, occupied a corner office with a spectacular view of the lake spreading away into the distance, the snow covered peaks of the Alps just visible to the south.

Beesely and Otto chatted with Mathius and his senior managers for five minutes, Johnno peering out of the windows on the north side, getting his bearings. He had been studying maps of Switzerland since they had arrived and that morning had scanned a street-map of Zurich in preparation. He could see the split in the river to the east, a large railway marshalling yard a mile north, the bridges over the river, apartment blocks and a few business tower blocks, the gentle hills in the distance dotted with houses. Everything here appeared mostly a drab grey, he noted, not like the ornate wooden houses around Zug. Many of the buildings in view housed decorative red spires, and the strange double-spire church reminded him of Liverpool for some reason. He took a long moment studying it.

He could not see many tall buildings in the city, perhaps a dozen at most poking higher than the common grey roofs and treetops. There were more trees than he had imagined, and the long trams snaking around corners reminded him of a computer game. Looking down on three moving at the same time made him feel a little sick; it seemed as if the ground beneath him was not solid.

It came time to see the vault. They were led back down in the lift, down to a sub-level, and opening into a small room with two security guards sitting at a desk. The guards jumped up, checking everyone in the group carefully. They greeted the CEO and Otto by name, welcoming Beesely and Johnno with a professional detachment. The CEO ushered them through a strong door and to a large circular vault segmented into many individual client compartments. Two more security guards stood at the far end, a third sat at a desk.

Each of the vault's compartments stood separated from its neighbour by vertical metal bars, floor to ceiling, shiny stainless steel bars around six inches in diameter. Johnno and Beesely peeked through the bars. In each section rested a neatly formed block of either gold or silver, stacked uniformly from around three foot high to about six foot, many small metal trolleys dotted about.

An extremely clean compact forklift truck parked in a corner made Johnno smile. 'Baby forklift?' he dryly enquired. He tapped it, as if tapping a child's shoulder. 'What do you want to be when you grow up? JCB?'

Smiling, the CEO led them to one particular cage. 'We have just had a large transaction, one foreign government paid out on some bonds and debt to another.' He pointed. 'So that stack reduced by around four boxes to that stack over there.'

'How much was transferred?' Beesely asked.

'About twenty million.'

'Any souvenirs?' Johnno asked.

The CEO stepped to the desk and fetched a small gold bar, just three inches long. 'That is worth about two hundred Euros,' he explained as he handed it over.

Johnno held it, heavier than it appeared. 'I'm feeling inadequate again.'

'We can't all have a big one,' Beesely quipped, making the CEO laugh loudly, an echo caused in the cavernous room.

Otto led them to a cage on the other side. 'This is yours,' he quietly, and proudly, pointed out. There, in the middle of the cage, stood numerous six-foot high racks of gold bars, twenty feet long and eight feet wide.

'Could be awkward taking it to the shops,' Beesely quietly pointed out, his eyes wide.

Johnno stepped up. 'Hits you when you see it like that, just what you're worth.' They stared, mesmerized by the stack of gold bars the size of a small bus.

'And that's not all of it,' Beesely quietly commented.

Johnno turned to face Otto. 'It's not ... you know, as golden coloured as I thought.'

‘There are slight variations in colour around the world,’ Otto quietly informed him. ‘In the movies you see mostly old, poorly refined gold, a traditional yellow colour.’

Next came currency. They took the lift up one level, through a similar security screen before opening a much thicker vault door.

‘This vault door has been used in several movies,’ the CEO enthusiastically pointed out.

‘I can see why,’ Beesely commented as they entered, the round metal door four feet thick.

Ducking through, they found similar sized compartments, but this time with strengthened glass doors and walls separating them. Within each compartment rested blocks of currency in fine mesh baskets, each bundle the size of a house-brick and wrapped in plastic with a paper band visible inside denoting the various contents. These compartments had not been split by client, but by currency.

‘Around three billion in various currencies,’ Otto pointed out. ‘Mostly dollars.’

‘Not Euros or Swiss Francs?’ Beesely queried.

Otto explained, ‘Most of the world’s transactions are done in gold or dollars still, so there are mostly dollars here. Many smaller Swiss banks deposit their dollars with us knowing that they would most likely never be drawn to cash, always an electronic transfer somewhere else. In fact, we have just had a deposit from another bank - deposited by a Nigerian politician - ten million in dollars, still wrapped in labels that came from us. The money was a development grant, paid to Nigeria by the European Union.’

Beesely glanced at Otto from under his eyebrows. ‘Our taxes at work. I think we should do something about that. If this fella did not need the money any more it could go to a genuine African charity.’

The CEO suddenly seemed ill at ease.

‘Any more souvenirs?’ Johnno asked with a grin.

Otto smiled, walking to the end desk and removing a wad from a cabinet, signing a form for it. He handed the thick wad to

Johno. 'There is one note from almost every country in the world. It is only worth around one hundred Euros, but makes an excellent gift, especially for children.'

'Thanks,' Johno replied, inspecting it. 'I'll try not to take that personally.'

2

Otto, Beesely and some of the bank's senior staff now headed for their pre-arranged lunch. Johno walked around the corner with them, making his excuses when he noticed a car dealership. Something was burning a hole in his pocket.

It was a BMW dealership, a vintage racing car sat gleaming in the window. Johno ambled in, admiring the new BMW 7 Series he had seen as they walked past. With hands in pockets he circumnavigated the shiny monster, noting this model's magnolia leather covers and real wood finish.

'Darf ich Ihnen helfen?'

Johno turned to find an attractive young lady in a white blouse and dark blue pin-stripe skirt, long and flowing ginger hair. He cocked an eyebrow and grinned. 'I should think so.'

If she noticed, she was maintaining a professional detachment. 'You are tourist?'

'No.' He opened the car door, gesturing her towards the other seat. 'Why don't you get in, then you can tell me about this model.' He slipped in and closed the door.

Glancing at the showroom boss, the lady walked around the car and guided a pair of long legs into the passenger seat, trying to be the eternal professional. 'You work here, sir, in Zurich? Maybe in finance?'

Johno ran his hands over the car's interior, lovingly caressing it. She could not help but notice the sensual undertones. '*Gastarbeiter?* Nein,' he answered without making eye contact. Neutral was already selected, the keys were in the ignition, he started it up. It purred. He smiled, surprised that it was fuelled with the battery connected; UK car showrooms often disallowed that.

‘Was it this model you were interested in, sir?’

‘Don’t call me *sir*,’ he softly requested, still smiling. ‘I work for a living.’

The sales assistant frowned her lack of understanding, noticing now her boss walking towards them.

Johno checked the mirror. Two middle-aged women were sitting in a Five Series immediately behind him. ‘Could you close your door please, I want to check the sound proofing.’

After a moment’s consideration she obliged. Whilst focused on his passenger, Johno slipped into reverse and eased back, smashing the car’s rear lights on the Five Series and shocking the two women sitting in it. ‘Oh dear,’ he muttered.

‘Sir!’

He selected ‘drive’, shooting forwards but catching the brake just in time to smash the showroom’s front window without going right through it. Reverse, back to where they started off.

‘Mein Gott!’

Amused, Johno said, ‘I like it. I’ll take one, but not this one, love - it needs a bit of work.’

The sales assistant fled the car as he switched the engine off.

Johno eased out, closing the door at a leisurely pace before stepping around to her as staff descended upon him; or rather moved like Swiss professionals and walked briskly up to a respectful distance. As they quickly spoke to the sales assistant, Johno took out his wallet and the K2 issue credit card. With an amused grin he approached the girl. Handing over the card he said, ‘I’ll take one, you’ll get the commission.’

Still stunned, she took the credit card as the manager squeezed politely by. ‘Sir, you have damaged a car and broken our shop window!’

Johno shrugged. ‘Still learning to drive. Sorry mate.’ He lit up, despite the no smoking signs and looks of horror from the staff.

The sales assistant had been studying the credit card. Now she took her boss firmly by the elbow and whispered in his ear. The man quickly inspected the credit card before turning back to

Johno. Bowing slightly he asked, ‘Sir, do you have some other identification on you, please?’

Johno opened his two-part K2 ID for them to see, before opening his jacket to reveal his holstered pistol.

The manager again bowed his head, a polite, if somewhat forced smile. ‘Thank you, sir, we will have a vehicle of this type delivered to where you desire and billed to your account. What... *colour* would you like?’

‘Do you stock Passion Red?’ Johno asked, straight faced.

‘I believe ... not, sir.’

‘Silver will do them. I want it delivered to Schloss Diane in Zug tomorrow. In the meantime, I require this young lady to accompany me to lunch, where she can tell me all about it.’ He turned to her and smiled. ‘Have you ever lunched with the directors of K2?’

Her eyes widened, the manager stiffening.

Across the street Mr. Grey fought hard to suppress his laughter.

Beesely sat chatting with a group of five on a large table, two additional places being prepared as Johno and his guest entered the restaurant. Beesely glanced at him from under his eyebrows as he tackled his starter, listening to the bank’s CEO, Mathius.

Johno pulled out a chair for his lady guest and sat, two waiters attending. ‘I’m sorry, what *is* your name?’ he asked, turning to the girl.

‘Mitzi.’

Johno pointed around the table. ‘This is Otto, assistant CEO of the group, and this is Sir Morris Beesely, the big boss of everything.’

Beesely smiled politely, greeting her in German, as did the others. Then he turned his attention to Johno. ‘We shall have to put you in for your driving test soon.’ Johno stopped and stared, wide eyed. Beesely said to the sales assistant, ‘He does drive, expertly in fact. He drives dignitaries around, and is my personal bodyguard. He has walked past your window many times in recent weeks, unsure about whether or not to ask you out. You

are, after all, very young and beautiful. And Johnno, well, he has been shot many times protecting people like me, leaving him some scars and ... a little nervous now of approaching girls.'

Mitzi smiled at Johnno, clearly flattered, and a little overwhelmed, squeezing his knee under the table.

'So,' Johnno whispered. 'Ginger pubes ... or shaved?'

Her eyebrows shot up.

'Er ... Johnno?' Beesely called. 'The table is not that big. We can ... hear you.'

Johnno faced him with a large, false grin. 'I was kinda hoping she would slap my face and walk out. That way I could go after her, cock my weapon, and return.'

Beesely's features turned to stone. He glanced at Otto, who put his hand in his pocket and pressed his phone three times.

Johnno continued, 'Otto, your people are sat by the door?' Otto nodded. 'And you don't have anyone behind me?'

Otto shook his head, barely noticeable, a concerned look.

Johnno maintained his false smile. Quietly he said, 'Well, then, boys and girls, when I move suddenly you get the fuck under the table.' He stopped smiling. 'Or else.'

Beesely glanced at Mathius and his two deputies, nodding. Then Johnno moved.

Spinning to the right, he stood and reached inside his jacket, pistol out, turning, grab the slide, pull back. Just as he came to bear on the first man, now looking directly at him with a steely stare, a near-empty soup dish caught him on the forehead, thrown by the woman at the table, soup splattering across his face. He had no choice but to close his eyes.

The closest man grabbed the end of the pistol, lowering it as he stood, throwing a punch to Johnno's chin a second later. Johnno had lurched backwards with the impact of the soup dish and the punch did not make full contact. He landed on his back on a table, a crunch of glass and a sharp pain in his shoulder as the women sat their yelped. He kicked upwards, catching the man under the chin and snapping his head backwards. Stunned, the man wobbled backwards a step. Sliding forwards off the table to

the squat position, Johno jabbed the man in the stomach with his pistol, the man now bent double.

‘Halt!’ screamed out in tandem as two K2 men drew weapons on the second man and the dish-throwing woman. The woman raised her hands, her male colleague, now standing, following a second later. Two more armed men ran in, shouting in German for everyone to stay down.

Johno straightened, pistol-whipping the man who had hit him and knocking the man to the floor. He knelt on the man’s neck as Otto and Beesely approached, pistol to the man’s temple. ‘Who are you?’ he roared.

‘CIA,’ the man quickly let out.

Johno raised his head to Beesely, offering an apologetic look. He dragged the man upright by the collar. ‘Sorry about that, Boss.’

‘Don’t be,’ Beesely firmly suggested. He faced the man. ‘What station do you work out of?’ he demanded.

The man took a breath, glancing unhappily from face to face, breathing heavily. ‘Berlin,’ he answered, a distinct Germanic accent.

The sound of police sirens followed a few seconds later by two police cars screeching to a halt outside.

‘Remove them,’ Beesely ordered, but with no anger in his voice. Half turning his head to Otto, he said, ‘Check carefully who they are, please.’ He sat back down and called the manager over to his table as the police and K2 agents removed the three apparent CIA agents, Mathius and his colleagues easing up from under the table.

‘Sir?’ the manager nervously asked.

‘First, I would like to apologise for what just happened.’

‘We own this restaurant,’ Otto curtly, and firmly, pointed out as he sat.

‘Oh,’ Beesely let out, a glance toward Otto. He focused on the manager again. ‘Still, I want everyone here given a free meal as compensation, a free gift of your best wine or champagne.’ The manager bowed and retreated as Johno sat back down.

Beesely pointedly remarked, 'Johno, you have soup all over you.'

Johno picked up a napkin and wiped his face and suit. 'Tomato, not bad.'

'Sir?' a concerned young waiter called. Johno lifted head. 'You have a piece of glass in your back, and you are bleeding.'

'You have a small cut on your face as well,' Beesely unhappily pointed out.

Otto raised his phone and called an ambulance.

'So, been here a whole ... two days,' Beesely noted, sighing.

Johno shrugged. 'Didn't like having two *armed* men sat behind me.'

Beesely's eyes narrowed. 'They were armed?' Johno nodded. Beesely faced Otto with a studious look. 'That's not so unusual, but being spotted *is* - risking getting noticed, arrested, a diplomatic incident.'

'I've spent a lifetime looking for bulges under jackets,' Johno pointed out, rubbing himself down. 'As well as down good cleavages.'

'We must interrogate these people,' Otto quietly suggested, anger in his voice.

'No,' Beesely emphasised. 'They keep an eye on us, we watch them.' He waved a hand. 'There are probably some MI6 assets around here somewhere, sniffing around. We *do not* cause problems for each other.' He left his gaze on Otto, who finally gave a respectful head tip. 'They identified themselves straight away, so they were not being aggressive, just second grade watchers.' Softer, he said, 'It's almost as if we were meant to spot them, and shot them full of holes ... in a public place.'

Beesely took in the scene as people continued with their lunch. 'No screams or panic?' he puzzled.

'They are Swiss,' Otto pointed out. 'And most work for you at the bank.'

'Christmas party must be a riot,' Johno muttered. He turned, to find the girl now gone. 'Bugger. Must have been something I said.'

A bigger stick

1

The next day the Swiss Government came to the castle to discuss the Serbian problem. Herr Blaum was accompanied by the Foreign Secretary, a plump man of forty-five with thick black hair.

‘I would have come up to you in Bern, you know,’ Beesely offered as they shook hands.

‘It is fine,’ Blaum emphatically replied. ‘Here is a short beautiful drive. And we can pretend we are busy out of the office.’

Beesely smiled formally. ‘Of course. Which way do you come normally, north route or south?’

‘South route is quite beautiful - you have the lakes. Longer, for sure, but nicer,’ Blaum explained.

Beesely shook the hand of the Foreign Minister. ‘Mr. Delgarcia. Welcome.’

‘Thank you, Sir Morris. I have heard good things. You are not like Herr Gunter.’

Beesely settled his guests around his desk. ‘*No one* ... was like Herr Gunter, thank God!’ They laughed. ‘Tea, coffee?’

Beesely made sure that they were relaxed, placing some fresh cake in front of them, Otto joining them a minute later and closing the door. Beesely began, ‘Sorry to bring you both down here, but as Otto has already mentioned we have a problem with some elements of the Serbian Government, and industrialists.’

The Foreign Minister suddenly turned serious. ‘It is not surprising. They used to be a large and powerful country, a large economic bloc under Tito. The West deliberately spread dissension in Croatia and Bosnia. They started the war, not the Serbians!’

‘Quite likely, Minister, and I do not disagree with you. But the break-up of the old Yugoslavia *has* strengthened NATO’s southern border and provided some new allies for us in the form of Slovenia and Croatia. Not a bad thing. Gentlemen, I am not

here to justify the break-up of the old Yugoslavia. I asked you here today to request your kind assistance in trying to repair any damage done to relations between Switzerland and Serbia by the late Gunter.'

The Ministers glanced at each other.

'A noble aim,' Blaum offered.

'And quite the full circle,' Delgarcia noted.

'New management,' Beesely firmly stated, tapping the desk hard with a finger.

Delgarcia asked, 'What did you have in mind?'

'A small summit, an official invitation to their Foreign Minister, along with their intelligence chiefs, and also those elements of the private security companies that Gunter had problems with.'

Otto leant forwards. 'In fairness to Gunter, he did not start this problem. The Serbians began to kill business rivals in the west, to get involved in drugs and guns in the Czech Republic, and their government seems to have previously ignored these actions. Gunter fought back when directors in some of our companies were threatened and then killed.'

The Ministers nodded their acceptance of that.

'It's a fair point,' Beesely conceded. 'But the *way* in which he retaliated could have been better handled.'

Blaum offered Beesely a strong glare. 'Receiving a video of your employees *getting the chair* will always cause a problem, I think.'

'Most certainly,' Beesely agreed.

At the drawbridge, the Ministers paused before getting into their cars.

'Is there any British agenda here?' Blaum asked Otto.

Otto clasped his hands behind his back. 'If there is, I do not see what it is ... other than to mend relationships as he suggested.'

'Could British Intelligence be interested in using us to get access to Serbia?' Delgarcia probed.

‘Beesely is not trusted by British Intelligence,’ Otto informed them.

The Ministers were surprised.

‘Why not?’ Delgarcia asked.

‘Beesely ran operations for MI6 many years ago, finally into Kosovo. One mission went wrong, the man Johnno being injured. The British Government refused a rescue plan, so Beesely funded one himself. Since then they have been at odds, despite the fact that they used his services on many occasions for unauthorised operations.’

The Ministers glanced at each other before getting into their car. As they drove away Otto watched them with a studious frown. He lowered his head and thought for a minute before stepping back inside.

With Johnno sat on his desk, Beesely remarked, ‘I just discussed Gunter’s methods of disposing of people he didn’t like ... with two Swiss Government Ministers.’

‘And?’

‘They didn’t react in a way a Government Minister should. They knew. Not only that, they seemed to tolerate it.’

Johnno cocked an eyebrow. ‘Tail wagging the dog around here?’

Beesely offered Johnno a small shrug. ‘Anyway. Got a job for you.’

The Swiss Ministers had agreed to send the invitation, and to try and get the Serbians there for the weekend, Johnno having been sent back to the UK to get some ‘kit’ and to round up a few instructors. Now Beesely just had to trick the CIA into lending him some hardware, the Swiss into letting them in, and the Serbians into falling for a bit of smoke and mirrors. It would be a challenge, but great fun trying.

Beesely dialled. ‘Burke, Beesely here.’

‘Ah, Beesely. How’s the weather down in the country?’

‘I’m in Switzerland, old chap.’

‘Ah, right. Isn’t that where your secret headquarters are?’

‘Nothing quite so dramatic, this is where our business interests are, research and computers, you know.’

‘Sure. How’s the weather there then?’

‘It’s lovely, clear sky, nice view of the lake. Anyway, need a favour.’

‘What would that be?’

‘Well, it seems that the Serbians are trying to kiss and make-up with a few governments around here; Swiss, Austrians, Germans and Italians.’

‘They were supposed to be on our side after that thing in Kosovo and their elections, now they just elected a bunch of right-wing pro-Russian nationalist guys to their parliament. Going to be more problems there!’

‘Quite. Anyway, seems the Swiss have asked me to host some of the talks since we own a lot of land down here, hotels and the like. And, with my connections, seemed best suited.’

‘Anything you can do to ... derail these talks?’ Burke softly enquired.

‘Well, I should think so, but I could do with a bit of help.’

‘What d’ya need, Beesely?’ Burke reluctantly asked.

‘I could do with a show of force, a bit of hardware to make these Serbs think we are just that bit tougher than we are.’

‘Swiss would never let *us* in.’

‘Not normally, no, but I had a sneaky idea. You see, in the summer there are various medical rescue exercises here, up in the mountains, the Germans sending down doctors in helicopters to winch people off mountains.’

‘Yeah, yeah.’

‘So if there was an American military team here, from Germany, all medical staff wearing combat gear, and who just happened to be parked up on my private runway when the Serbs landed—’

‘They’d think the Swiss Government had allowed our military in,’ Burke noted, his enthusiasm growing.

‘Which the Swiss would emphatically deny—’

‘Causing a lot of distrust ... and the talks break down. I like the way you think, Beesely. Still, it won’t be easy, I’ll have to get back to you.’

‘Just let your boss know that the head of Serbian Intelligence should be popping over, same chap who sold your crashed Stealth Fighter to the Russians a few years back.’

‘Hell, might just have to pop down myself,’ Burke offered.

‘I was counting on it. We’ll send a plane for you when we’re further along.’

2

‘What’s up, Doc?’

Dr. Manning looked up from his desk. ‘Johno?’

‘In the flesh.’ Johno slipped into a familiar leather chair.

‘I ... wasn’t expecting you. Is everything OK with you?’ He squinted without his glasses. ‘Are you hurt?’

Johno touched the stitches in his forehead. ‘Don’t start on the psycho-babble, not that kind of visit.’ He handed Manning a cheque.

Manning’s eyes widened. ‘From ... Beesely?’

‘Not ... exactly,’ Johno said with a pained expression and a slight smile. ‘You’re not to repeat this, but Beesely has come into some money. One part of his family were Swiss, all dead now, so he inherited a Swiss bank.’

‘A Swiss bank?’

‘Worth billions, so I hear,’ Johno stated very matter of fact.

‘Worth ... *billions*!’

‘Like I said, you ain’t supposed to know.’

Manning studied the cheque. ‘Well ... thank him for me.’

Johno laughed. ‘It’s not for you, plonker.’

‘It’s not?’

‘No, it was my idea. That’s for ex-soldiers with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.’ He lifted his gaze and tipped his head, a quizzical frown forming. ‘Which I used to think had the initials PMT for some reason. Anyway, I want you to fix ‘em all up, as you did for me.’

Manning squinted at him, offering a sceptical look. 'I would be very surprised if anything I said had any effect on you.'

'Don't sell yourself short, Doc, coming here kept me sane. Well, kept me in blowjobs from lap dancers, and *that* kept me sane. So you helped a lot.'

Manning eyes widened. 'You'll forgive me if I don't enter that into your notes.'

'Fair enough.' Johnno stood. 'Oh, we're living in Switzerland now, big castle, underground complex, back in the game.'

'Back in the game?' Manning was worried.

'Don't worry, Doc. If I get shot up you get some more business. Anyway, that money - I want you and your band of merry shrinks flat out looking for ex-soldiers going loopy. More when it runs out.' He left.

For a full minute Manning did not move, he just stared at the door, or the cheque.

* * *

As Johnno walked into a private function room of a country pub, just outside Hereford, the cacophony of numerous overlapping conversations quickly ebbed away. Smoke filled the upper half of this run-down and poorly decorated room, despite the new 'no-smoking' signs. Numerous half-drunk pints were littered about the table, two men playing darts.

'Johnno, you're looking old and fat!'

'What happened to your face?'

'It's your round, sonny!'

Johnno tipped his head, stood in his faded black suit. 'My round, you say?' He took a thick wad of fifties out of his jacket pocket and tossed it to the man who had made the suggestion.

'Who'd you rob?' the man asked as he examined it. 'Must be five grand here!'

'That enough to shut you old wankers up for two minutes?' Johnno asked, kicking the door shut behind him. He had their attention. Stepping to the edge of the table where the men sat, Johnno began, 'Old man Beesely is recruiting, but no one who's

still in. And I don't want any short-timer who's contracted to a private agency or pissing about in Baghdad.'

'What's the job?' a voice called.

'Depends on the individual. If they are young, fit and able - and want to go over the wall ... then they can do so.'

'You don't expect any of *us* to go Rambo, do you?'

Johnno glanced around at the ageing faces. Most were now in their fifties, bald or greying. 'No, we need you for some training.'

'What kinda training? And where?'

Johnno took a breath. 'It's simple, no risk to life or limb, lots of cash. You'll be in Europe; hot showers, warm food and five star hotels. You'll be training some spooks in field-craft, plus assessing an existing counter-terrorism and hostage rescue team.'

The men glanced at each other.

'What's the catch?' a man asked from the back.

'First, you'll be working with me.'

Howls of derision echoed around the room.

'Yeah, thought that would cheer you up. Second, you'll be taking direct orders from old man Beesely.'

The men fell silent, a few nods exchanged.

'Third. The people you will be working with are very secretive, paranoid, and if you accidentally tell the News of the World who you're working with they'll kill you, your family, your grandchildren, your pet dog, and then follow your family tree so far back that you'll have never fucking existed!'

'Sounds dodgy, Johnno.'

'It doesn't have to be, you just need to keep your traps shut. They'll treat you all very well, Beesely will make sure of that.' He raised a pointed finger. 'But make no mistake, breach their security deliberately and there will be one hell of a penalty. If you're on board then you can expect your phones to be tapped, especially mobiles, your homes to be bugged and watched, your movements monitored.' Many shifted uneasily in their seats, looks exchanged. Johnno added, 'They'll send someone around to chit-chat to your family, a milkman or a copper. If the missus knows what she ain't supposed to you, get the chop with no

money. It would be up to Beesely to stop them from hurting you.'

'Why so much security?'

'These boys are sharp. They protect a lot of wealthy people, transporting a lot of dosh around the world. They run casino and bank security ... and they take their work seriously. Fine, let them, that's not your problem. This deal is twelve weeks at a time, train the boys, create some training programmes, take some of their team to Belize, some to the desert, money is no object. You each get two grand a week in cash, that's a hundred grand a year in used twenties. Plus all costs are met, all billets and food, any medical bills and transport there and back in a posh fucking Learjet.'

Murmurs of approval bounced around.

'It's not so bad,' a man began. 'Most of us have done stuff for Her Majesties Government we never discuss. Not so difficult clamming up for a hundred grand a year.'

Grunts of approval were exchanged.

'And if MI5 put you under pressure on your return?' Johno firmly pressed.

'Have to create a good cover story,' the man suggested, laughing. 'The missus has been swallowing those for years!' From the laughter, he was not alone.

'I'm in.' Two men raised their hands.

'Listen, Johno, do you think they could kill my wife anyway?'

Hysterical laughter filled the room; a beer mat flew at Johno, thrown like a Frisbee.

Johno began giving out business cards. 'That's my number for you lot. If you know any boys interested in some wet work they can contact Max at AGN Security. Right, now get some frigging drinks in!'

For the flight back Johno had three sleepy guests, the remainder would follow. These three 'had no lives, no wives, and just a kit bag of clothes and memories' as one of them had described it.

Johno watched them as they slept off the hangover. These men, now well into their fifties, could train or assess the world's best counter-terrorism teams, yet in Hereford they were claiming the dole, sitting in the garden deckchair and slowly wasting away. Their wives had long since left, kids grown up and gone, leaving them with their memories of glory and a few fading photos on the mantelpiece, plus numerous novels started but never finished.

Two of these men had been on the Falklands when Johno had landed, sneaking about behind enemy lines, killing at will. The other had been on the Argentine-Chilean border before being caught and swapped six months after the end of the conflict. He had been tortured. Johno now had the power and the money to help his old mentors regain their self-respect.

* * *

Standing just outside the courtyard Otto dialled a number.
'Minister? Otto.'

'How goes it?'

'They have begun to recruit ex-SAS instructors.'

'As you predicted. Good, keep me informed please.'

A prize more valued

1

Otto seemed pensive. 'What is it?' Beesely asked as they walked through the grounds, down towards the lake.

'I have a request from ... from the secret Swiss banking organization.'

Beesely turned his head and frowned a question as they walked. 'I thought *we* ... were the secret banking organization?'

'K2 is the security agency within this banking group. There are many other banking groups. The men who wish to see you are from the original secret banking organization, started a hundred years ago - maybe three hundred.' He coughed out a nervous laugh, unusual for him. 'There is an official banking confederation, this other group sits behind them - the real power.'

Beesely studied him carefully. 'This group, they're powerful?'

'In financial terms yes, they are much bigger than our bank, perhaps one hundred times bigger. But they are not as logistically powerful as K2. They sometimes use K2 for their *dirty work*, as you say.'

'So what do they want?' Beesely probed.

'They have heard you are more approachable than Gunter,' Otto explained.

Beesely shot a glance at Otto. 'Not much of a recommendation, my lad!'

'They wish to meet as soon as possible, they have many grievances, not least the success of our bank at their expense.'

'Is it ... at their expense? I mean, if they are a hundred times bigger?'

‘Not really. But when we find out about company take-overs we do not tell them, so they lose out potential gains. We also get oil trading information which they do not.’

‘Gains they would make if they were in bed with us.’ Beesely clasped his hands behind his back. ‘I see. So, how did Gunter relate to them?’

‘He would meet with them when he was younger, but he wanted to be their leader, and he wanted them to be more aggressive and to kill competitors.’

‘They had no stomach for it?’

‘No. They always wanted to be very discreet,’ Otto pointed out.

‘But they have used K2 for dirty work?’

‘When they needed, but they did not want Gunter to have a hold over them.’

‘I see no reason why we should not patch things up. Arrange a meeting here —’

‘No, they will not come here. This group meets in secret, only at night, a place that is quiet. We own a hotel on a hillside not far away - it has been used before for such meetings. I will arrange the meeting for tonight.’

Beesely stopped. ‘Tonight?’

Otto looked apologetic. ‘They are insistent in their need to see you.’

Beesely breathed out. ‘I guess we best shine our shoes then.’

‘Gunter always said this.’

‘What?’ Beesely snapped.

‘It is common for Swiss to have the shined shoes. When I was a boy, Gunter said this often.’

Beesely made a face. ‘Hope I do not remind you of *him* too often.’ They walked on. ‘How much influence does this group have over the Swiss Government?’

‘The Swiss Government is as much regional, by canton, as it is Federal. And this group ... they are the real power.’

Beesely took in the view. ‘So, around here the tail wags the dog.’

‘I have heard this English saying –’

‘It means, the criminals run the prison.’

‘Ah. We say ... the skiers run the competition, not the judges.’

Beesely cracked a smile. ‘I shall have to remember that one.’

* * *

The short distance to the hillside hotel became noteworthy in the number of Range Rovers Beesely spotted parked on corners. A police checkpoint greeted them at the start of the private road leading to the hotel, IDs shown, two more groups of K2 agents checking the vehicle.

They found the hotel’s car park decidedly cosy and literally bumper-to-bumper with expensive cars, numerous agents with dogs patrolling the narrow spaces between lines of vehicles. All members at this meeting were supposed to arrive within ten minutes of each other and leave in a similar manner, part of a strange ritual that Otto had explained earlier.

All day Beesely had considered that Otto was nervous. It had taken some thought as to why, and, in a quiet corner away from everyone, he asked, ‘What would this group say and do if they knew about Gunter’s death, and your secret-within-a-secret Jewish group?’

Otto had taken a long time answering. ‘A recent survey put ten percent of Swiss answering ‘yes’ to being anti-Jewish. That is, of those that answered truthfully.’

‘And if people thought that your group was –’

‘There would be open warfare, with the Swiss Government on their side. We could not be shut down because we are Jewish, the world’s newspapers would make such a big problem. But they would find a reason to give us problems, the Government.’

‘And this ... *society*?’

‘They would wish us ... gone.’

Beesely nodded to himself. 'And we'd be the ones getting the chair!' He took a breath. 'So ... no pressure.'

The delegates to this secret meeting sat gathered around a large table, the lights turned down low, Beesely and Otto ushered in by non-K2 men wearing sombre black suits with striking white gloves. Beesely stopped and surveyed the scene; old men in smart suits, blackened by the dim lights, the tabletop completely clear. Then he just waited. After almost thirty seconds delegates were starting to glance around at him. As was a nervous Otto.

He tipped his head towards Otto. 'We own this hotel?' Otto nodded. 'Turn the lights up a bit, then organize some food and drink.'

'That is not customary,' the nearest man pointed out in a heavily accented Germanic voice.

'If you wish to hold onto custom, gentlemen, then we could continue to treat you as Herr Gunter previously did.' He waited, deliberately placing his hands in his pockets, a slight insult within Swiss etiquette.

The delegates glanced at each other for ten seconds. Finally Beesely firmly ordered the lights up, drinks and food. Only then did he walk around to the only available seat, conspicuously not at the head of the table. He touched the seat back and then pushed it in. By standing, his head remained the highest in the room.

'I always thought that it was customary for the Swiss to greet a visitor standing, with a handshake and eye contact. And not to sit with one's hands below the table?'

They glanced at each other. He was, after all, correct.

'Gentlemen. You hold onto your ... *outfit's* traditions, nothing wrong with that and something I understand very well. But I am English, not Swiss, and we are here tonight because of a break in tradition; the loss of Gunter and my arrival here. It has been suggested to me that you were not happy with Gunter. Well, you and the rest of the civilised world.' He detected a few smiles. 'If we are to move on, and

break with traditional animosity, then now is as good a time to start as any.'

He ambled slowly around the table, noting faces and searching for any display of emotion he could find. In this group, that was not easy.

'First, gentlemen, I will state clearly that the banking group that I have ... *inherited*, along with K2, is Swiss, through and through. It is part of Switzerland, loyal to Switzerland, and will always act in the best interests of this country. I do not follow Gunter's philosophy, and I have already begun making some sweeping changes. You, gentlemen, need not fear K2, nor our bank's activities. I am here to join with you, and to help you any way I can, within the rough guidelines that I have set myself.'

A face turned upwards. 'And what are those?'

Beesely bent towards the man. 'To make it up as I go along!' he whispered, causing many frowns and some smirks. He straightened and continued circling the group. 'In the past you have lost out when our bank has used information gathered by K2. But I am sure, gentlemen, that there have been times when you have come across information that may have been useful to us, and probably to each other, which you did not disclose.' He could see by their glances that he was correct. 'I know you have your secret meetings once a month, but I doubt very much that you contact each other daily when you get bits of stock trading intelligence landing on your desks.'

Drinks were placed onto the table, causing a natural break in proceedings, then the requested food. At first the delegates did little other than sip water, so Beesely helped himself to cake and tea, Otto following his example.

'Gentlemen, I am not saying another word until you relax and take some food and drink,' Beesely loudly stated. 'At the very least, if tonight is a complete failure, I will have sampled some more of your excellent local delicacies.' He munched away ostentatiously.

Encouraged by Beesely's example, the assembled delegates started to help themselves to nibbles, pouring tea and coffee, as Beesely had hoped for. All except for the elderly man at the head of the table, who continued to sip his water.

After a minute, Beesely placed down his cup and continued to pace. 'So, gentlemen, in an ideal world, what do you desire me to do?'

All eyes turned to the head of the table. Still sipping his water, the headman motioned to the subordinate on his left to answer.

'We want ... we would like ... better access to information gathered by your agents.'

Beesely had been peering out of the window at nothing in particular. Now he turned his head. 'Why?' He waited.

The spokesman's brow knitted. He glanced back at the elderly leader. 'So that we may all benefit.'

'Do we *all* pay towards K2 agents' training or salaries?' Beesely asked, still looking out of the window with his hands in his pockets; in Swiss terms, deliberately insulting body language.

'No,' came the uncertain reply.

Another man turned his head towards Beesely. 'Without the approval of the Swiss Government, K2 would not exist or operate.'

'Did you say that to Gunter?' Beesely asked without turning around.

Otto hid a smile. No response came back to the question.

'We had no effective working relationship with Gunter,' the same man admitted a few seconds later.

'So *no* then, you *did not* say that to Gunter.' Beesely turned. 'Perhaps you think I am weak?' The spokesman turned toward the group leader. Beesely added, after a long pause, 'Or perhaps you think that I am someone you can do business with. Negotiate with?'

'Yes,' the man answered with a forced smile.

‘Good, because if you did think I was weak there would have to be a demonstration.’

That got their attention. Even the old man at the head of the table suddenly registered a pulse and put down his water.

‘You see, gentlemen, I have been working very closely with British Intelligence and the CIA for almost forty years. I was a senior manager in British Secret Service for decades; I helped train your P-26 unit a long time ago.’ Many men exchanged surprised looks. ‘Even without K2 I could make my enemies disappear. With my pedigree of contacts, and K2’s resources, just think what I could do.’ He circled the table again.

The delegates shifted uneasily in their seats.

‘I’m surprised none of you have suggested that the Swiss Government would come to your aid.’ They made no response. Beesely halted his pacing. ‘So, to repeat myself, what - in an ideal world - would you gentlemen like me to do?’

The initial spokesman said, ‘We want ... we desire ... closer co-operation with your group. You are the only large banking group that is not part of this society.’

Beesely mulled over the word. *Society*: ancient, secret, steeped in tradition, akin to the Freemasons. It was not an organization, body, company or group. A society.

‘Yes.’ He stared out of the window again.

Their spokesman queried, ‘Yes ... to what?’

Beesely turned and walked slowly towards the society’s leader. ‘Yes, I will work with you and join this organization.’

Now their leader actually raised his head an inch, his expression lightening.

‘But there are conditions, and I have some suggestions.’ Beesely pulled out the chair that had been originally reserved for him, placing it next to their leader at the head of the table, another cultural insult. He sat. They glanced at each other. ‘I would suggest, gentlemen,’ he began, addressing everyone except their leader, ‘that it would be difficult and impractical for us to send you stock intelligence data on a day-by-day

basis. Sometimes, this information needs to be acted upon quickly. There is also the risk that sending out such information to many people may invite accidental disclosure. So I would suggest this: we create a fund, a common pool of money that is under the direct control of our banking group, that is used for all those transactions that are secret, highly profitable and yet risky in their nature. We will pick up the cost of running such a fund, and we will take twenty-five percent less of the profits that may result from that fund's activities than you would.'

That woke them up. Even the old man shifted in his seat.

Beesely helped himself to sparkling mineral water and some nibbles. 'So, are we done here?' He stood and faced the leader.

The old man slowly rose to his feet. 'You mentioned conditions. This thing is good for us. So, what ... conditions?' His words came slow and heavily accented, his pronunciation difficult to understand.

'That's easy. I believe that there is no point in being rich and powerful unless you can enjoy what you have. At the next scheduled meeting I will arrange for four of the world's top chefs to prepare a meal for us. Thereafter, at each meeting, your members will rotate that responsibility and prepare for us the world's finest food to sample during our discussions. If that is not done to my satisfaction I will not be attending.'

The old man raised his eyebrows.

Beesely walked around to Otto, then turned and addressed the group. 'Draw up some plans, put down some ideas, send them to Otto. I am sure that we can come to a good working arrangement. And some gifts for each other might be nice. At our next meeting I would like some of Switzerland's finest hand-made trout and salmon flies.'

Otto hid a grin as long as he could.

'Enjoy that?' Beesely asked as they drove back.

Otto shook his head. 'I could not believe you asked them for this fund. If they agree to this fund, and it is a good size, we will have investment managers of the world asking us for favours.'

Beesely offered Otto a confident smile. 'We'll use it for our means, like a big stick. Put pressure on those who deserve it.'

'Le fox?' Otto began. 'You are an entire field of foxes, wearing glasses. In *any* language!'

'A compliment if ever I heard one.'

Two wrongs do make a right

1

The following morning, the Nigerian International Development Minister walked into a group bank branch in Zurich accompanied by Otto. The bank's manager and staff recognised Otto immediately, surprised that he now accompanied a client. Otto motioned the Minister towards a cashier at a desk as the branch's manager approached.

The manager smiled, bowed his head and greeted Otto with a handshake before glancing at the African Minister, the Minister tall and imposing in his colourful traditional robes. 'Is everything in order?' he whispered.

Otto whispered, 'The Nigerian Minister, he seems to think he will be cheated if not accompanied by a senior official.' The manager rolled his eyes, only visible to Otto, Otto whispering, 'So far today he has asked for girls and cocaine.'

Again the manager rolled his eyes. 'The client always comes first,' rolled off his tongue, a well-practised cliché.

After checking the Minister's ID, and receiving his numbered account details, the cashier transferred the balance of \$10m directly to UNICEF, money that had been previously appropriated for the Minister and his family to retire on, generously supplied by the taxpayers of Europe. Finally the Minister stood, adjusting his robes.

'Is everything in order, sir?' the manager asked, smiling warmly.

'With the help of God, all will be well,' the Minister boomed, towering over the two Swiss.

The manager hid a frown as best as he could, said goodbye to Otto, then stood for a moment watching his visitors leave.

In the car Otto turned to the 'Minister'. 'It was a good accent.'

‘Thanks mate, learnt that from my grandfather,’ came back in a London accent.

Otto handed over a wad of money. ‘You’ll be driven to Paris. After that stay in touch.’

‘No problem, Boss. I’ll get the train back up to London.’

As they drove through Zurich the real Minister, plus his wife, sister, mother, mother-in-law and brother were starting to decompose, buried six feet under an isolated field just across the French border. The chemicals they had been buried with would accelerate the process and leave no identifiable remains. Their stolen funds would now go where they were intended.

At first Beesely had just planned to liberate the funds, perhaps have the Nigerians deported or accused of some crime, but when he had discovered that they were in a Cannes hotel, a thousand pounds a night hotel, eating caviar and driving Rolls Royce cars, all with money earmarked for starving Africans, he had lost his temper.

Along with their stolen \$10m he added another \$10m of his own.

* * *

Johno walked through the mist, kicking the swirls with his foot and studying the strange patterns. Then he was there, The Pearly Gates.

Suddenly there appeared a man at a table, a sofa and some drinks. ‘Your name?’ the man asked. Now he had wings.

‘Johno.’ He lit up.

‘No smoking in here.’

‘Really? Bugger. Can I smoke out here?’

The man nodded. ‘Yes, you’re outside.’

‘Outside of what?’

‘Did you not go to church, study the Bible?’

‘Not really.’

‘Christened?’

‘Dunno.’ A beer appeared. Johnno sat, took a drag and tried the beer. ‘Ah ... that’s good.’

‘Guests *outside* may do as they please. But what you do is observed.’

‘Got any girls?’ A girl in a bikini appeared. She sat next to him. ‘Yeah, baby.’

The man with wings began, ‘When you are ready, you may present yourself for judgement.’

‘Oh.’ Johnno gave it some thought. ‘How long do I get to prepare?’

‘Time has no meaning here, you may take as long as you like.’

‘Won’t be holding anyone else up, will I?’

The man with wings frowned very hard then shook his head. ‘Holding anyone else up?’

‘In the queue behind me.’

‘No.’

‘Oh ... right. Well, if you don’t mind, mate, could you - you know - piss off for a few hours.’

The man disappeared. The girl was shaking him by the shoulders. ‘Johnno! Johnno!’

He opened his eyes. ‘Marge’, his favourite ‘lady-friend’ leant over him.

‘Shopping! You said we’d go shopping. Come on, get up.’

* * *

Guido Pepi placed down the phone and surveyed the five men ranged in front of his desk. ‘Interesting.’

‘Something?’

‘This man Beesely has taken The International Bank of Zurich *back* into the Swiss bank society.’

‘The Swiss Government has planned this,’ another man complained. ‘First the inheritance goes to a British Intelligence officer, then they get SAS instructors, now they

re-join the Bank Society. And this man Otto has doubled the number of guards in six months!’”

‘Yes,’ Pepi let out, long and slow. ‘They are building up their defences. Consolidating.’

‘Why now?’ a man asked. ‘They sat quietly by for decades.’

‘A good question,’ Pepi stated. ‘And I would guess that, when we find the answer, we won’t like it.’

‘The bomb is still in place?’ a man asked.

Pepi faced him and nodded. ‘Soon, gentlemen. Soon.’

* * *

The chairman of The Lodge smiled widely and stood up, report in hand. ‘By God, he’s done it!’

‘Done what?’ a man asked, one of just four men at the table.

‘Sweet Jesus!’ the chairman added.

The men glanced at each other, waiting for the revelation.

The chairman placed his hands on the table and rested his weight on them. ‘You know that secret Swiss banking group, the one we’ve been trying to get inside for sixty years. Well, Beesely just joined them.’ He detected some shocked looks. ‘Not only that, it looks as if he’s persuaded them to let him trade their combined funds.’

Henry drummed his fingers on the desk, thinking hard.

2

That afternoon, Johno sat on a chair in a field, a strong blindfold over his eyes, an air-pistol in his hand. He listened intently. Twenty yards away, agents were watching with interest as the chosen man inched along, trying to sneak up on Johno without getting shot. Money changed hands, bets were laid and payoffs made, as Jane sat on a small mound with her friend Sarah from the kitchen, also English. They were having a picnic.

Franz was doing well. Three other agents were nursing bruised body parts, having been hit by the air-pistol. He took a slow and measured step.

Johno listened intently, raising the pistol. Franz grinned, Johno's aim a good thirty degrees off. Johno fired with a 'click'. Missed. 'Bollocks!'

He reloaded, Franz taking the opportunity to take two large strides before halting. Again Johno listened intently, turning his head like a ship's sonar. Franz stepped on a snail with a *crunch*. Johno aimed and fired, catching Franz in the knee, a scream let out. Johno ripped off the blindfold as a cheer came from the onlookers, Franz within six yards, the closest so far. Money reluctantly changed hands.

'Best so far, mate. Next!'

Jane offered Sarah some salad.

'You don't eat much,' Sarah noted.

Jane glanced up at her briefly from behind a large pair of sunglasses. 'I've never eaten much,' she quietly admitted.

'Ever been married?' Sarah delicately probed. She knew very little about Jane, their conversations had always tended to be about anything other than private or personal matters.

Jane coughed out a small laugh. 'No.'

'Never met the right one?' Sarah delicately broached.

Jane admitted, 'Never met any ... *one*.'

'Bad luck with guys?' Sarah ventured sympathetically.

'No luck. I never bothered with any man.'

'What ... ever?'

Jane shook her head. 'I had an illness when I was thirteen...' She shrugged.

'God, I'm so ... sorry.'

'Not your fault,' Jane offered. 'Just how it is, that's all.'

Sarah studied the large black pools that were the sunglass eyes. She sighed. 'I had an abortion when I was sixteen, before I came over here.'

'Did your parents know?' Jane asked.

‘My mum did, helped arrange it. It was at the time when she was thinking of leaving my dad, so after I was better we came here.’

‘Do you see him?’

‘My father? Sometimes, he’s not so bad now, better than he was. He calls sometimes, cards at Christmas, you know.’

‘My step-dad was murdered,’ Jane revealed.

‘God!’

‘When I was twelve. They never caught who did it.’ She forced a nervous laugh. ‘Pity. I wanted to thank whoever it was.’

Sarah was shocked. Squinting in the bright sunlight she probed, ‘Not a great dad then?’

Jane glanced at her briefly before turning back to the field’s activities. ‘The worst.’

‘How long have you worked for Mister Beesely?’

‘Almost twenty years,’ Jane said, brightening. ‘My mum was left a house in London, so we moved when I was eighteen. I went to college for a while, then she got a job for the Ministry of Defence, I did part time work there. Beesely needed a secretary when he was in the country, so a friend of my mum’s got me an interview. I got the job because that guy - friend of Beesely’s - knew mum. Well, that’s what I thought at the time.’

‘What do you mean?’ Sarah asked as she peeled a boiled egg.

‘Mister Beesely arranged for me to work for him, special like. Fixed it all up.’

‘Because he knew that guy?’

‘No, because he’s my real dad,’ she quietly admitted.

‘What?’ Sarah gasped. ‘Mister Beesely is your father?’

Jane nodded. ‘You aren’t supposed to know.’

‘I’ll ... not tell anyone.’ Sarah considered it carefully. ‘So he had you work for him, because he’s your biological father, and you never knew?’

‘No, not till last week.’

‘Last week?’ Sarah asked in a strong whisper.

Jane nodded. 'He revealed it when Otto came over. Up 'til then I just worked for him, but always knew he was too nice to me. He always fixed everything like I was his daughter, not like I worked for him.'

'Why didn't he tell you before?'

'Didn't want people to know in case they might come after me.'

'Ah. With his type of work that makes some sense. But other people like him, people in Military Intelligence, they must have normal families.'

'Stuff that Beesely did was never normal; gone for months on end, always a lot of strange looks and rumours. Police came for him twice. The one thing he isn't... is like other people I saw in the MOD. My mum always said he was into some odd stuff.' She forced a quick, nervous laugh.

'So you worked for him all these years and never knew? Wow. Still, he looked after you, stuck by you. That's more than could be said for my dad. I never got any money after we came here.'

'Beesely always made sure I never had any problems. And Johnno. He got arrested once, he punched a man who stole my bag.'

'Beesely?'

'No, Johnno. Nearly killed the man.'

'What happened?'

'The jury all heard about the Falklands War and the SAS and stuff. Ten minutes after they ... you know, went to talk about it, they came back and said not guilty.'

'Lucky. Did Johnno not marry?'

Jane shot Sarah a look, visible even through the large sunglasses. 'He's got more problems than me. Spent a year getting over being shot in Kosovo. He's afraid to show all them scars to girls so he likes to go with prostitutes without taking his clothes off. He can't spend the night with a girl because of the nightmares, he has to be drunk to sleep soundly.'

‘Don’t go telling me too much,’ Sarah nervously suggested. ‘Get me into trouble.’

The Serbian delegation was due to land soon, on the small private airstrip at Zug. Their Ambassador to Switzerland had arrived by helicopter, the man had been kept deliberately alone on the flight. It had been suggested that the helicopter bring the Swiss Government as well, but Beesely had a plan.

The Swiss Government contingent had arrived by car an hour ago for ‘talks before talks’, Beesely having ordered the training camp cleared of most staff, the guards to be smartly dressed and discreetly in the background; those Swiss Ministers were now being entertained by Beesely in the top floor restaurant. The restaurant tables had been moved to create a ‘conference’ venue so that everyone would be sat facing each other.

Burke and his CIA team were hidden in a hut, Johnno and the SAS crew huddled in another a few yards away. As were close to four hundred men dressed in camouflage clothing and wearing black ski masks. Four Black Hawk helicopters, of the US Rhine Army Medical Corps, waited in a field two miles from the airport, the crew quickly changing clothes and slapping green and black water-based paint onto large red-cross signs.

Otto stood waiting in the small airport lounge, politely talking about nothing much to the Serbian Ambassador. It turned out the man’s grandfather was German.

Beesely’s phone rang, and he excused himself from the company of Ministers Blaum, Delgarcia and others. ‘Beesely here.’

‘Five minutes, sir.’

‘Thank you.’ Holding the phone at arms length and looking over the rims of his glasses he pressed red, followed by the big green button. Bringing the phone to his ear again he said, ‘All stations, five minutes. Go.’

Johno stepped out and blew his whistle. Three blasts.

Feeling his phone vibrating, Otto informed the Ambassador that his countrymen would be landing in five minutes.

Black Hawk rotors started to turn. Crewmen put on black ski masks and attached ropes to the sides of the helicopters.

Burke pointed a finger at the door. Berets were donned, boots shined on the backs of legs.

It was a perfect day, no clouds and little wind as Otto stood waiting with the Serbian Ambassador. He held a hand over his eyes and squinted to the east as the Serbian delegate's plane, a small Russian commuter aircraft – a three engine Yak 42, descended towards the runway. A red carpet had been laid out for the visitors, backed by a row of four black Range Rovers, and an executive minibus that could hold ten passengers.

The small jet touched down smoothly, Otto pressing a button on his phone three times without anyone noticing. The plane slowed, not needing much runway, then taxied around, marshalled for the last hundred yards by a ground controller dressed in bright orange. All was going well, the sun beating down, a few flies buzzing about. Two ground-handlers waited with large wooden chocks for the aircraft's wheels; they looked warm and uncomfortable inside their overalls and ear defenders.

Then Otto considered that he and the Ambassador were stood a little too close to where the aircraft would halt and said as much, leading the man back a few steps. The door on this aircraft opened on the front left, Otto now watching with Swiss precision interest as the pilot lined up with the end of the red carpet. The aircraft slowed as it advanced towards them, its engines whining, some slight adjustments to speed and direction evident.

The plane missed its mark and braked hard, its nose dipping. The red carpet now lay under the wing, crumpled and held down by the aircraft's wheels, small black circles of oil appearing. The Ambassador turned to Otto, who quickly jumped in with, 'No problem, this happens all the time, difficult for the pilot to judge up in the cockpit.' The Ambassador forced a smile.

The dignitaries were formally greeted by Otto before being loaded into the Range Rovers, the final two men exiting the aircraft pointing and laughing at the red carpet. Otto tried to appear as if he had not seen them, pressing his phone four times as they boarded the vehicles.

Where the airfield track joined the main road, pairs of dismounted motorcycle police in bright orange uniforms stood lined up, giving priority to the cavalcade. A mile along the road they neared the lake and, as a matter of strange coincidence, two 'ribs' - black inflatable dinghies - were speeding up the lake, six soldiers in each wearing black ski masks. They could not have been missed, the Foreign Minister glancing at the Intelligence Chief. Then the dull drone of helicopters grew unmistakable, the passengers glancing out and peering skywards.

Around the next bend the convoy drove parallel to a large field, four Black Hawks hovering. Ropes reached down to the ground some sixty feet below, soldiers rappelling down at speed, dropping into the prone position ready for simulated weapons firing.

The Foreign Minister was concerned. 'American! Delta Force?'

Otto pressed his phone five times, turning to the Ambassador, who had been watching the display with great concern. 'They are American medics, here for exercises - mountain rescue. They come every year.'

'They look like commandos.'

'Really?' Otto strained to see. 'I must confess, I do not know the difference from one uniform to another.'

The Ambassador seemed totally unconvinced. The convoy passed through the woods and they climbed towards the castle, Otto crossing his fingers and hoping that this day would end well. They turned off the main public road and into the camp, the gates now hosting four police motorcycles on either side, the convoy passing through without being stopped.

The Foreign Minister studied the gate, and its security complement, as they passed through. ‘This man Beesely takes his security seriously.’

A squad of a hundred men in black uniforms and ski masks jogged down the side of the road in tight formation, four abreast. On the opposite side the same thing. Alongside the road stood another hundred doing star jump, thankfully without their ski masks on this hot day, the guests taking it all in. At the next bend a block of men underwent rifle drill. Opposite them stood Burke and his team, American uniforms; Green Berets. They were stood in the road, the drivers having to slow and ease around them, Burke and his men shouting loud orders with distinct American accents.

‘Green Berets!’ The Intelligence Minister stated, noting the distinctive cap badges.

In Otto’s lead vehicle the Ambassador grew concerned. ‘You have quite the small army here. And more Americans?’

‘We have the main training facility here for our counter-terrorism teams and hostage rescue teams. The bank has many rich clients and, should they be held hostage for ransom, we may be tasked with a rescue for them, almost anywhere in the world. We have teams in Belize in South America this week. The Americans offer us assistance in jungle medicine and what they call, let me see, combat medical first aid.’

‘So, more *medical* staff.’

Otto forced a quick, polite smile.

Further along the compound road, and now in sight of the castle, the convoy’s progress slowed, Johnno and his gang in the road. All were suitably attired in British camouflage

clothing and SAS berets, sporting MP5 sub-machine guns. The vehicles slowed to a crawl, all the drivers lowering their windows.

Johno strolled up. 'Good day, Mister Otto,' he offered, checking the faces of each man in the vehicle.

'You are British?' the Ambassador politely enquired.

'We're not at liberty to say, sir.' He walked to each vehicle in turn, talking to each driver and checking all the faces, the convoy finally waved on.

'Serving British SAS,' the Intelligence Minister noted.

The Ambassador turned to Otto, tipping his head. 'More... medical staff?'

'No, they are the private security of Herr Beesely. They are British SAS. They also teach at the counter-terrorism school.'

2

Peering down through the restaurant windows, Beesely now noticed the first vehicle of the convoy park up in front of the drawbridge, just a sprinkling of guards to greet them. 'Our guests have arrived,' he announced, turning on his heel. 'Should be up in just a minute or two.'

Otto and the Ambassador stood waiting at their vehicle, joined a minute later by the rest of the Serbian delegation.

'Your headquarters ... is a castle?' the Intelligence Chief asked with a cheeky grin.

'No, these are the guest quarters and meeting rooms. Just for show,' Otto informed them. He stamped his left foot. 'Our headquarters are six hundred metres under our feet, stretching out into the lake for one kilometre.'

The visitors stopped dead, looking for any signs that Otto might be joking.

Otto explained, 'It was an old copper mine, from the year 1890, I believe. It was converted to a nuclear bomb shelter in 1962, thereafter turned it into a facility. It is more bomb proof

than Cheyenne Mountain according to the American engineers who have looked at it.' He wished now that he had a secret camera, wondering what the resolution of the cameras on the drawbridge might be like. The expressions on their faces were quite extraordinary, he considered.

Female K2 administrative staff, now dressed in traditional Swiss costumes – long grey skirts, white blouses with black waistcoats - lined the drawbridge and ushered the men inside through the courtyard, through the Great Hall and to the lobby area. Four at a time were sent up in the lift, the young lift attendant now replaced by a guard in a suit. Beesely and the Swiss delegation warmly greeted all of the Serbians in turn, ordering them drinks.

After close to ten minutes of greetings and idle chat standing up, Beesely began nudging delegates towards their allotted chairs. Each delegate's position on the table had been marked with a formal nametag, which included a full job title: Minister, Ambassador, etc. The munitions exporter did not quite understand his title, his tag replaced by John: 'Dodgy Weapons Dealer'.

When everyone had finally seated themselves Beesely walked around to the top of the table, Otto sitting to his immediate right. Still standing, Beesely called, 'Gentlemen.' The room fell silent. 'Gentlemen. I would like to start by making it clear that my seat here, at the top of the table, does not mean that I am in charge of this meeting.' With that he sat and poured himself some water, adjusting his paper and pen.

'May I welcome you all here to Schloss Diane, a name given to this fine old castle by its late owner. As you have probably gathered, this castle is just symbolic, a hotel with rooms and restaurants. My headquarters are ... elsewhere. Castles were traditionally seen as imposing, and this one is in no way intended to intimidate anyone.'

The Intelligence Chief leant forwards. 'And what about the military camp outside? Is that not meant to intimidate anyone?'

‘Certainly not. And may I add that it is not a *military* camp, we are a civilian organization with some ties to the Swiss military and police.’

‘And what ties might those be?’ the Intelligence Chief probed.

Before Beesely could comment, the Swiss Interior Minister, Blaum, answered, ‘We are a small nation, with limited resources, so the counter-terrorism and hostage rescue teams run by the International Bank of Zurich are lent to us, should we need them.’

‘And what about foreign military involvement?’ the same man added.

The Minister Blaum frowned his surprise. ‘What do you mean?’

‘We saw American and British soldiers outside, American helicopters!’

Minister Blaum explained, ‘There are a few American medical helicopters here with their medical staff. They come with German and French teams for medical exercises in the mountains.’

The dull drone of rotor blades quickly grew louder.

The Intelligence Chief stood up, a false smile spread from ear to ear. ‘Perhaps these are the American *medical* helicopters now?’

Several of the Serbians joined him at the window, along with all the Swiss Government representatives, leaving Beesely sipping his water and glancing at Otto from under his eyebrows. Four Black Hawks flew South West down the lake, no more than a hundred metres from that particular window, large red crosses on white backgrounds glistening in the sun. Medics with red-cross tunics sat in the doorways, waving.

‘Yes, that is them,’ Minister Blaum pointed out as he turned and sat back down.

The Serbians did not look pleased, more annoyed, with a hint of confusion thrown in. After all, they could not have been completely sure of what they saw earlier.

‘Gentlemen,’ Beesely called, getting them to settle again.

‘What about the British and American foot soldiers we saw?’ the Intelligence Chief pressed, pointing a finger angrily in a direction that he obviously thought led to the compound, not the toilets he was actually targeting.

Beesely glanced at the toilets with a puzzled expression. The Swiss Interior Minister looked as if he was about to field this question as well. ‘May I?’ Beesely cut in, Minister Blaum easing back. ‘Gentlemen, we have both British and American former soldiers here, advising on tropical medicines, and some British counter-terrorism experts. They are private contractors, not sanctioned by their various governments.’

‘That I can confirm,’ Minister Blaum offered.

His Serbian counterpart did not look convinced.

Beesely cleared his throat. ‘Gentlemen, if I may.’ It finally fell quiet. ‘I have *requested* your presence here today with the kind assistance and co-operation of the Swiss Government, in the hope that we can resolve some issues that are of importance to us all. First, Herr Gunter is dead. This banking group and its associated companies are under new management, I am now the head of the group. And may I be emphatic in stating that I do things differently to Herr Gunter, not that I ever met him.’

‘You never met your step-brother?’ The Serbian Ambassador puzzled.

Beesely held up a finger. ‘Brother-in-law. And no, I never met him.’

‘Your takeover here seems very ... quick and seamless,’ their Foreign Minister pointedly remarked.

‘I have good staff. The place runs just fine without me.’

The Intelligence Chief folded his arms. ‘And also strange that you are connected to the British Secret Service.’

‘Connected? Why, my dear chap, I was a senior official with British Intelligence for forty years.’

With that the Intelligence Chief unfolded his arms. 'So this large Swiss group with direct links to the Swiss Government is now run by anti-Serbian British Intelligence!'

Minister Blaum objected, so too his colleagues, the Serbian Ambassador trying to calm his countrymen.

Chaos ruled for almost a minute, Beesely glancing at his watch. He finally tapped the table with his glass. 'Gentlemen, please.' He waited. 'My Serb friends, you are doing the good people in this banking group a great disservice. They are Swiss, and their loyalty is to Switzerland and its independence. Nothing I may do is going to change that, and you would be foolish to think that I could simply walk into the bank and try and make its staff sit up and follow orders from London. They would not, they are not, nor will they ever be required to. And if we keep to this antagonistic approach we will be here all day and achieve nothing.'

'Then state what you want!' the Serb delegate labelled as 'Dodgy Weapons Dealer' barked. His words might have been louder if he had noticed the insult.

Beesely took a breath and a sip of water. 'What I would like, gentlemen, is firstly to apologise for the way in which the late Herr Gunter ... *treated* some of your countrymen.' He waited for it to sink in. 'Furthermore, I wish to mend relationships, both for the sake of Swiss neutrality, and for the sake of this banking group.'

The Serbians glanced around at each other.

Finally their Ambassador delicately broached, 'Serbian funds, of private companies, appear to have ... disappeared from several Swiss banks, including this bank.'

Minister Blaum straightened, clearly horrified. 'We have received no such formal complaint!'

Otto leant forwards. 'They were accounts used by criminals, also by Serbian Intelligence and some pro-Serbian political groups in Europe which have been outlawed. Herr Gunter interfered with them. Since the funds could not have been explained to a Serbian court, there was no challenge to them.'

Minister Blaum nodded his understanding and sat back.

Beesely raised a hand to silence them, then raised his phone. 'Beesely here. Unlock all the frozen Serbian accounts. Immediately.' He put the phone away. 'Gentlemen, consider that a first step. And, by the way, we will be paying interest on that money at the appropriate rate.'

The Serbians did indeed look surprised.

'Moving along, gentlemen, I would like to point out that we have concrete proof of illegal actions by most of the persons relating to those bank accounts. Photographs, fingerprints, video taped conversations, signed confessions and witnesses. Should we send that to the world's press then you, gentlemen, would have a problem. You would even have a problem with your own press and courts.

'But I am not going to do that. It would serve no useful purpose other than to harm our new friends' interests. The way in which Herr Gunter dealt with the problem was to compound one criminal act with another. Which is why we are here, to bring an end to it.'

'You are serious?' their Intelligence Chief challenged.

'Yes, my friend, I am serious. If you are prepared to unwind the problem from your side then we are more than happy to do it from our side. That is not a sign of weakness on either side, we simply find it prudent to concentrate on our business interests - those that make us money - and not on conflict. Furthermore, we will enter into negotiations to offer venture capital to Serbian projects that may benefit your people. We are also interested in acquiring land in Serbia and developing business partnerships.'

Ten minutes later the Serbians, with their heads spinning, stood up and began talking amongst themselves in small groups, Otto and Beesely making sure everyone had way too much food, and, more importantly, way too much drink.

Otto approached Beesely and led him subtly away from the crowd. Suitably out of earshot he said, 'I confess that I do not understand your strategy here.'

Beesely smiled at his offspring, nodding, then gazed out of the window. 'You remember the story of the shoe salesman?'

'Yes, he died in front of you.'

'And imparted some wisdom to me that has been with me for quite some time. He did not just talk about shoe sales, or the psychology of people and their footwear buying habits. He also discussed many other things as he sat there dying. One was how to deal with bullies and enemies, a useful topic in my chosen career.'

'He told me that, when the need arose to make friends with an enemy or a bully, make sure that you carry a big stick - and that your stick is bigger than theirs. Then, once you have either beaten them down, or shown that you could, offer them a truce.'

Otto followed Beesely's gaze out through the window. 'Gunter would have just tried to kill them.'

Beesely took a breath and sighed. 'And lost the opportunity for us to crack open Serb Intelligence and see what these bastards are really up to.' He faced Otto with a smile.

'Le Fox,' Otto whispered. 'Your new unofficial title.'

3

Negotiations became a friendly chat; people walked around, peered out of the windows, sampled the food, huddled in groups or sat with bits of paper and made notes.

An hour after the meeting started Beesely got his signal, the first joke cracked by a Serbian. Easing away from the warm bodies he raised his phone. 'Mission complete.'

* * *

Johno had been at the far end of the camp, sat in a hut with Burke and his men, plus the ex-SAS 'old dogs'.

‘Should have seen the look on their faces when I checked their vehicles,’ Johnno laughed, can of beer in his hand.

‘What’s he got planned?’ Burke asked, sipping a beer.

‘Going to snuggle up to the Serbs, open a bank branch over there. Today he’s going to give them everything they want.’

‘He is?’ Burke queried, his eyes widening.

‘We’re going to open up hotels over there, buy shares in banks and travel agencies and TV and the media, all using Swiss neutrality so that no fucker will suspect anything. We’ll have first hand intel’ on a large chunk of their country; financial transactions, movements on planes, hotels, you name it.’

Burke smiled and nodded. ‘Told me he was going to derail these talks.’

Johnno grinned. ‘Got you here, didn’t he? Listen, mate, learn something now: what he says, and what he does, two different things. And never play poker or chess with Beesely, he’ll clean you out every time. Just when you figure you know what he’s up to, that’s the time to throw your notes out the window and start again. He’s *always* three steps ahead of everyone!’

Johnno’s phone chirped. ‘Yeah?’ He stood and tucked away the phone, grabbing his whistle and winking at Burke as he headed for the door, giving four loud blasts when outside.

Burke stood and faced his team. ‘Let’s roll, boys. Or should I say ... pawns.’

Hundreds of men began to run to a side entrance of the camp, through dense woods and away from the lake, following a precisely engineered plan of action. White and orange police BMW motorcycles sped off. In little under five minutes the camp was cleared, just a handful of guards left on the gates, smartly dressed and with no weapons visible.

A promise of a further meeting had been made and agreed to by all sides, to be held in Bern in a month’s time. Following that, a Swiss delegation would fly to Serbia and

the new Serbian President would be involved. Their Ambassador happily signed a 'statement of intent' with his Swiss counterpart and accepted a lift back to Bern, taking the scenic route. The remaining Serbs were driven back to the airfield through the empty camp.

'He is making a point, I think,' the Serb Foreign Minister began as they drove off. 'That he has the firepower if he needs to use it. And he has the friends in England and America if he needs them.'

'Do you trust him?' the Intelligence Chief asked.

'Yes. I think he is more interested in money than anything political. Also, I think that the Swiss Government has put pressure on him to resolve this. He needs to find a solution, so do we.'

The Intelligence Chief nodded, taking in the beautiful scenery.

* * *

The Serbian spy adjusted his telescope with renewed interest since the time was drawing near. But unknown to him his recently discarded semen lay in a laboratory undergoing DNA checks. A bottle with his fingerprints on now sat covered in a fine black powder in a plastic bag, carefully labelled on a laboratory shelf. The contents of his rubbish bag were neatly laid out across a large white table and being sifted through thoroughly.

He sat back down, grabbing his half-empty packet of crisps, not realising that through a crack in the curtains an eye watched. He lowered his trousers, the game show soon starting.

4

An hour later Otto and Beesely descended to the basement. All of the 'commandos' were present; Burke and three of his men, Johnno and the three 'old dogs'.

Burke stepped up as Beesely accepted a half drunk bottle of beer off Johnno. 'All your ... *objectives* achieved?' he unhappily enquired.

'An excellent start,' Beesely commended. 'And all *you* had to do was stand there and look pretty.' Burke's men disagreed with that appraisal, a few rude words fluttering around.

'Don't forget the choppers!' Burke complained.

'Never.' Beesely held his arm. 'Give my thanks to the Rhine Army Commander and ... *your kind government.*'

'No problem, looking forward to some first hand intel' on the Serbs. My good buddy the European Chief is gunna be well pissed off at me.'

Beesely raised his eyebrows. 'Do you care?'

'Hell no. Get yourself a cold one.'

'Once you've changed from your fatigues and scrubbed up, let's have a bite to eat around 7pm, and we can talk shop.' Burke nodded, re-joining the party.

Beesely personally thanked everyone in turn, pressing the flesh and leaving a firm imprint on them all. Finally, he turned and addressed the room. 'If you don't mind chaps, I'm rather tired after today's fun and games. Not as young as I was.'

Johnno walked him to the lift, Otto holding the door.

At the lift Beesely turned to Johnno. 'Tomorrow, if you could find some time to take Jane into town – a little shopping, some lunch, drive through the hills?'

'OK, Boss,' Johnno quickly answered, already turning back to the celebrations and leaving Beesely unconvinced of the sincerity of the statement.

* * *

Guido Pepi read the detailed report with a studious frown as he sat alone in his study, his twenty-six year old daughter, Maria, wandering in. She glanced at the report, ran a hand

through his hair and left him alone. Pepi had hardly noticed, his attention focused, only glancing up after she had left.

Ten minutes later he placed down the report, lifting a cold coffee before he noticed the drink's temperature, his right hand man stepping in after a knock.

'Just got back, sir.'

'Obviously,' Pepi lightly commented.

'That the K2 report?' his assistant enquired, stood at the side of the desk.

Pepi nodded very slowly as he stared down the length of his study. 'Yes,' he sighed. 'And quite ... strange. A former British Intelligence officer, who appears to have inherited all of Gunter's money, makes an big effort in a show of force to the Serbs, then gives them everything they could want.'

'That does seem strange, sir.'

Pepi looked up. 'I'd almost believe that this man did not inherit the money, that he is ... an actor, working for the Swiss Government, or the Bank Society.'

'He does not seem to be acting like someone who had inherited the money.'

'When it comes to K2, we should know better than to... apply normal logic.'

'Our people inside have noticed nothing strange, sir.'

Pepi continued to stare down the length of the room. 'Apart from the fact that this ... this very rich old man appeases those who might be his enemies. Why? Why did he do it? And why the show of force first? And why is he not sat on a beach somewhere?'

'As you said, sir, an actor. Or at least in league with the Swiss Government.'

'All of our people inside say otherwise, especially inside the Bank Society.' He heaved a big sigh, adopting a puzzled expression. 'So far I cannot piece this puzzle together. Nothing seems to fit.'

'The bomb, sir.'

'Yes. That should show us what is really going on.'

* * *

With a broad smile, the chairman of The Lodge read the report as the assembled group waited. He finally looked up. 'Beesely just used the Swiss bank leverage at his disposal to open up Serb Intelligence. Even got an invitation to visit them.'

A man eased forwards. 'That CIA section chief, Burke, was kinda surprised that he got approval for the helicopters. Need to watch him.'

The chairman nodded, chewing on his unlit cigar. 'Now Beesely knows that we're on the clock, no-way he could have got those choppers otherwise. He knows, we know, nobody mentions it. Just like being married and cheating – both sides know, but nobody says anything.'

The end of the beginning

1

Johno had been snoring when Beesely took Jane shopping in the small town of Zug. Now, Beesely and Jane walked knee deep through a huge field of yellow flowers, just a few miles from the castle. The field stretched down to a river, a few wooden houses dotted along its banks, a sturdy wooden bridge spanning its brisk flow.

Jane added to the handful of flowers that she had already collected, looking a little odd in the over-sized sunglasses she had borrowed. Keeping her warm was a thick polo-neck jumper inside a padded jacket.

‘Is that the river ... that the lake flows into?’ she asked.

Beesely glanced up at the bodyguards, fifty yards back towards the road. ‘What? Yes, bottom end of the lake just around that small hill I believe.’

‘So why don’t they dam it and use ... that hydro –’

‘Hydroelectricity? They do, more than five hundred of them around Switzerland.’

‘The summers here are good.’

‘Well, we’ve had a good week luckily, but you wouldn’t want to be here in the winter. Very chilly.’ He could see that she was struggling with that thought. He added, ‘Not that we would be here in the winter. Beach house in the Bahamas I’m thinking, large villa with a private beach.’

They slowly inched down the slope.

‘Oh. So we won’t be living here that much then?’

‘Good God no, just need to get things sorted, then we can travel a bit. Week here, week somewhere warm. Otto can run this place like clockwork. Like a precision Swiss clock.’

‘When do you think we’ll leave then?’

‘Oh, another week of sorting stuff here. I have a few other offices to visit, some around Europe. You can wait for me at the old house if you like - not sure I trust what those builders

are doing. Yes, why don't you pop back tomorrow and get me a progress report?'

She gave it some thought. 'I'd be by myself, what with you and Johnno here.'

'You've been by yourself many times before when we were away. Besides, haven't you made a new friend here?'

She half turned her head. 'Sarah. Her mum was English, from Cornwall. Speaks God knows how many languages. She's the assistant to the Guest Manager, Mr. Freezer.'

'Frieserling. Fry-zer-ling,' he corrected.

'I know, but we call him Freezer. Bit of a robot.'

'Around here, my dear, that would be taken as the highest of compliments.' She laughed, Beesely offering, 'I'll assign her to you, she's probably missing the UK.'

'Hasn't been back for two years.'

'Well there you go, she would probably jump at the chance.'

'What about Mr. Freezer?'

'I'll have a word with his boss.'

They stopped to inspect a cluster of bright blue flowers.

'Who's his boss, then?' Jane enquired.

'Old man Beesely. Apparently.'

They walked on, admiring the view. She ventured, 'I think Johnno has been ringing some famous American glamour model on the fancy phone. I heard him.'

Beesely smiled. 'I'll keep an eye on him. Makes a change from the Alzheimer's Society.' His phone rang. 'Beesely.'

'It is Otto. We have a small security problem.'

'Can it wait thirty minutes?'

'Yes, of course.'

2

As Jane walked inside Otto walked out, greeting her warmly and exchanging a few words, complimenting her on the flowers she had collected.

‘We have a small problem,’ Otto repeated as he reached Beesely.

Beesely led him towards the lawn overlooking the lake. ‘Go on.’

‘We have discovered a man renting a cottage on the far side of the lake –’ Beesely glanced at him, then out across the lake. ‘- and he is a Serb.’

‘Oh dear.’

‘We have had complete surveillance for the last twelve hours, but it seems he was there for maybe a week or two?’

‘Two weeks? That would have been long before we even contacted the Serbs. Before *you* contacted me.’

‘He was already watching this facility, I think,’ Otto suggested.

‘Not much to see from over there. Besides, why in God’s name would anyone try and watch this place, knowing that he would probably be caught and, more importantly, what we might do to him?’

‘This man is no professional.’

Beesely gave Otto an intolerant glance. ‘That’s obvious!’

‘He is alone and he does not leave the cabin. No one has seen him, not even the owner of the chalet. The booking was made by a Swiss man and paid in cash more than six weeks ago. This man drove across the German border two weeks ago, and he has with him a lot of food - he has not used the local shops, no gasoline, nothing.’

They both walked slowly down the grass, studying the far shore.

‘Not so unprofessional, avoiding local people,’ Beesely conceded.

‘This man puts his rubbish outside with his fingerprints on bottles, his DNA, and even papers with his name on, maps with drawings on. All in his bag for rubbish.’

‘Ah, not so clever.’

‘And he does not know we are watching him. In the chalet he has a large telescope.’

‘Wouldn’t see much, even with a large telescope. Not from that distance.’ Beesely massaged the top of his head, a heavy frown forming. ‘What possible use could he be to anyone? The best he could hope to do is report when vehicles come and go.’

He turned about and studied the topography of the ground in front of the castle, which parts could be seen from across the lake. Finally, he shook his head. ‘Can’t see how he would even know who was in the vehicles. Does he have a receiver for a listening device?’

‘No, nothing. We swept the chalet and surrounding area and his car. He has a mobile phone, but does not switch it on.’

‘An amateur who has been sent by a professional, some elements of each,’ Beesely mused.

‘If we have an agreement with the Serbian authorities, why is he still here?’

‘Let’s find out. Pick him up, keep him isolated and uncomfortable, but not hurt. Then go over his car, the house and especially his phone.’

Otto stepped away and made a call as Beesely noticed a silver Mercedes SL coming up the road, not a vehicle he recognised. Slowly ambling up the grass he stopped at the edge of the tarmac area.

Johno jumped out and waved lazily as his female companion eased out under an armful of shopping bags. He kissed her on her cheek, exchanging a few words before she headed inside. The keys were tossed to a guard who now drove the Mercedes away. ‘Need anything?’ Johno cheerfully asked as he stepped up to Beesely, Otto stood a few yards away with his back to them.

‘Only your undying love and devotion.’

Johno focused on Beesely, his eyes narrowing. ‘Don’t know about that.’

‘You seem to have made a new friend?’

‘Just one of the hookers.’ Johnno stuck his hands in his pockets and glanced towards Otto. ‘I mean ... physiotherapists.’

‘Hookers, and physiotherapists, should still be treated like ladies. I should know, I’ve been through some of the best of them in my time. And if this one is nice then she could put her former life behind her and may become a useful companion.’

Johnno seemed surprised at the suggestion.

Beesely stepped closer. ‘It does happen, you know - sugar daddy and all that. First, you would need to establish if she is any good in bed.’ He turned back towards the lake, hiding a grin.

‘She’s getting there. I’m teaching her. Slowly.’

‘Good, good. Wouldn’t want to rush into anything.’

Otto rejoined them. ‘Jane is waiting in the restaurant.’

Johnno held his watch for Beesely to see. ‘I was back on time.’

Otto added, ‘We will pick up that man in a few minutes.’

‘What man?’ Johnno asked.

Beesely answered, ‘Seems we have a spy across the lake. A Serb spy ... and he’s been rather haplessly spying on us with a large telescope.’

‘From over there!’ Johnno laughed. ‘Ain’t going to see sod-all from over there.’

‘Yes, we know. A puzzler, isn’t it?’

Stood on the veranda of his villa Pepi glanced at his watch, observing the second hand count down. He waved to his grandchildren as they splashed around in his pool.

3

The sound of the bomb’s detonation registered as little more than a muffled ‘thud’.

Beesely glanced down the slope to the lakeside road, half expecting to see two vehicles stopped after a collision. Otto

turned to the right, glancing at the office building. It sounded to him similar to a door slamming too loud.

Johno glanced every which way, grabbing Beesely by the arm as he did. 'That sounded like a grenade!' he shouted, loud enough for Otto to react.

'ALARM!' Otto shouted at the top of his voice towards the guards in the courtyard. The men began sprinting in all directions, but mostly towards Beesely. Red lights started flashing on the castle walls, a second later an alarm sounding.

'ALARM!' echoed, repeated by many voices in the distance.

'That is the fire alarm!' a surprised Otto shouted, now stood staring at the castle.

Johno manhandled the protesting Beesely to the nearest Range Rover, suddenly blanketed by six guards. Otto ordered a guard to drive and he scrambled into the front passenger seat. Beesely was trying hard to avoid getting injured by Johno as he was unceremoniously lifted head first onto the back seat, Johno sat on his legs a second later.

'Go, go, go!' Johno shouted.

Another siren wailed, this second one distinctly different from the fire alarm.

'My God,' Otto muttered as the vehicle drove away from the castle, carrying on the way it had been facing and past the office block, not back towards the camp and the main gate. Beesely screamed for Johno to get off his legs, trying to edge upright.

Johno grabbed Otto's shoulder. 'What is it?'

Otto sat dialling his phone. 'It is the alarm for a chemical attack. A chemical weapon has been used. Maybe nerve agent.'

'Nerve agent?' Beesely repeated.

Johno helped him sit comfortably. 'That's what that bastard over the lake was waiting for, to see if we all come running out bleeding out of our eyes and ears!'

Otto sat shouting questions in German down his phone. Something was not clear, he kept repeating it over and over

again. He directed the driver where he wanted to go as Johnno grabbed his shoulder again.

‘What’s happened?’ Johnno shouted.

With a voice still buzzing from his phone Otto turned all the way around to face Beesely. ‘There was an explosion ... in the restaurant.’

Beesely’s arms were flailing around, reaching for the door. ‘Jane’s up there!’

Johnno grabbed the top of his head and held his face an inch from his own. ‘Stay with us!’ he barked. ‘Stay with the game - we need you focused. Kill the emotion ‘til the shooting stops!’

‘Jane!’ Beesely cried again.

‘We ... don’t ... know!’ Johnno barked. ‘She could be anywhere. She could be on the bog or in her room.’

‘She was waiting for us...’ Beesely’s words were heavily distorted, his eyes moist, his breathing irregular.

‘Stay with us!’ Johnno repeated.

The car swerved hard, turning down a small lane towards thickening trees and the base of the mountain. A three storey traditional wooden cottage appeared from behind the trees, nestled against the base of the heavily overgrown cliff. The lower level housed a tall archway, big enough for a vehicle to drive into, a guard waving them into the black interior.

The driver flicked on the headlights and tooted his horn a few times as they entered a dark tunnel, lights appearing in the tunnel ceiling after twenty yards. The tunnel became much brighter as it widened into a cavern that a vehicle could easily turn around in. Ahead stood two guards in gas masks, sporting MP5s. Otto had lowered his window as they neared and now shouted orders. The guards grabbed at large handles and started to drag a set of massive steel doors open. When there appeared enough room, just, the driver sped through, again using his horn.

With Otto’s window wound down, the rush of cold air and the sound of rubber tyres on concrete filled the inside of the Range Rover. Lights flashed by, the noise level rose and

Otto strained to watch Beesely. Sharp braking slowed the vehicle as it entered an even larger cavern, the smooth interior walls painted a brilliant white.

‘Quick! Out!’ Otto shouted as he jumped down, more frantic than controlled.

Johno jumped quickly out of his door, so did the driver, and they bumped shoulders as Johno sped around to Beesely’s side.

Beesely hadn’t moved, he sat transfixed in his grief.

‘C’mon!’ Johno barked, grabbing hold of Beesely and practically carrying him out. The driver grabbed an arm and Beesely’s feet hardly touched the floor as they rushed inside another chamber, closely following Otto.

The corridor narrowed and darkened, barely enough room for them three abreast, red lights flashing in the ceiling. A guard wearing a gas mask opened an inner door, warm air enveloping them.

‘Here!’ Otto shouted. ‘Put him here!’ He pointed at a sofa on the right, up two steps. ‘Doctor!’

This was the emergency bunker, a quarter of the size of the main control room and on just one level; desks, chairs and computers laid out similar to its big brother. The lights were dim, sirens wailed and red lights flashed warnings from the walls and from many computer screens. Close to thirty people were now crammed into this room, which would have been cosy with just twenty.

Beesely was laid carefully down. Johno knelt beside him, holding his head and using his hand as a pillow. ‘You still with us?’ Johno whispered, their faces almost touching.

‘Secure ... the perimeter ... news ... blackout.’ Beesely’s eyes had remained closed as he whispered it. ‘Take charge.’

‘That’s more like it,’ Johno approved.

The doctor put a hand on Johno’s shoulder, a polite way of telling him to ‘get the hell out the way’. With one final glance back Johno turned away, pushing through the staff and seeking out Otto. Otto did not recognise it was Johno pushing through the crowd until he stood right next to him. Seeing

Johno's face reminded him, so he launched onto tiptoe and looked towards Beesely.

Johno grabbed the side of his head. 'Hey! Focus! Forget Beesely. First, win the fight. Second, secure casualties. We won't be any good to him if *we* ... are dead.'

Otto needed a moment to compose himself, taking a breath and straightening his tie. He nodded his acceptance of the suggestion.

'Is this room secure?' Johno barked to no one in particular.

'Yes.'

'Gas proof?'

'Yes,' Otto replied. 'Bomb proof also.'

'Primary perimeter? Is it secure?'

Otto pointed at a screen. 'We have video feed of outside.'

Johno led him closer to a screen that displayed nine small squares, each one a different part of the grounds. 'All gates secure?' he asked, loud enough for everyone to hear. People were answering. 'Any gunfire reported?' Negative. 'Any intruders reported?' Negative again. Johno rubbed his face. 'OK, tell the base guards to sweep for intruders in the grounds and also outside the gate, up to one mile. C'mon, move!'

Orders were barked into phones and radios, Otto now looking out of his depth compared to Johno.

Johno added, 'Then sweep all buildings for explosives. Evacuate the non-essential admin' staff.' He checked the monitors. 'Where was the explosion?' he asked, tapping the screen.

An operator used a mouse to click the top of the screen. Up came nine boxes showing nine different views of the restaurant. And each overlapping image displayed bodies.

Johno straightened, taking a deep breath. If Jane had been in there then she would be one of the casualties; none were moving. He faced Otto. 'You said it was a gas attack?'

Otto pointed to the wall. 'That blue and white flashing light ... it ... it means gas of some sort.'

‘Is it calibrated for nerve agent?’

‘Yes,’ Otto nodded, studying the bodies. Others had noticed the display and were stood with their hands over their mouths.

‘Cut those damn alarms!’ Johno shouted to no one in particular. A moment later they were off. He turned back to the computer operator. ‘Call up the command centre.’

Up came nine more images, this time of managerial staff going about their business, albeit hurriedly.

‘It looks secure,’ Johno noted.

‘Yes, it seems only one small bomb, in the restaurant.’

Johno held Otto’s arm and whispered, ‘Make sure no one in the outside world knows about this. We don’t want to appear weak!’

Otto turned to an operator who had been listening in and nodded a signal.

‘Is everyone in the castle out?’ Johno asked.

The computer operator displayed an outside image. A few dozen people were stood in a group, one taking a roll call.

Johno pointed. ‘Get *him* on the radio.’

‘Herr Frieserling, bitte!’

The man on camera could be seen lifting up a radio.

Johno pointed to the operator who had made the call. ‘Are they all outside?’

‘Sieben verschollen!’

‘I counted six in the restaurant,’ Johno stated, leaning forwards and tapping the screen. ‘Get the restaurant images back up.’

The live-feed images reappeared. With a finger touching the image of each body he said, ‘I still make that six. Wait, what’s that?’ There were four legs to a body; someone lay underneath. He turned to Otto. ‘Are the doors to the restaurant fire proof?’ Otto nodded. ‘Gas proof?’ Again he nodded. ‘So no one outside is in danger. Yet.’ He turned to the operator. ‘Zoom in on the windows. Are they broken?’

Otto pointed at several staff and told them to help. Images appeared on many screens.

‘Can anyone see any broken windows?’ Johno barked. No one answered. ‘Is there any way the gas could get out?’

The computer operator turned his head. ‘There is the chimney to the cookers in the kitchen.’

‘Show me.’ A different image came up. ‘That’s the cooking area? There’s no one in it, so they ran into the main area when they heard the explosion, getting the gas all over them.’ Johno pointed. ‘Is that door secure?’

‘Yes,’ the man replied. ‘Fire door.’

‘Cut off electricity and gas to the kitchens. Can that be done from outside?’ It could. Johno stretched his back. ‘So the gas is contained in the restaurant for now. Go back to it.’

Up came the same set of images.

‘We have chemical suits –’ a man began.

Johno turned to him. ‘Forget it. They are all *very* dead. And if you open the door a lot of other people will be dead too.’ He glanced towards Beesely, regretted having said that quite so loud.

‘That is the bomb, I think,’ a computer operator said, pointing at his monitor.

‘Zoom in,’ Johno ordered. He could see what appeared to be an aerosol can on the floor, ripped open and shredded at one end. ‘Yeah,’ he confirmed. ‘Small gas device. Show me the windows.’

The camera zoomed in on a window.

‘More,’ Johno ordered. ‘Best resolution.’ He peered at the screen. ‘Gel?’ he whispered. ‘Show me a body, close up on the hands.’

The operator glanced at him then zoomed in on a woman’s hands. ‘My God!’ The hands were twice their normal size, red and puffed up.

‘Now the face,’ Johno quietly added.

The man panned right to the ghastly image of a head twice as big as it should have been.

Johno straightened. ‘N20 nerve gas.’

‘N20?’ Otto repeated.

‘Its effects are called *Elephant Man Symptoms*. It blows up the skin and tissues, blisters the skin. Victims blow up like balloons.’

Otto turned and barked, ‘N20 nerve gas, get me all references!’

‘Don’t bother,’ Johno stopped him. ‘I know more about N20 than most. It was made by the Russians forty years go, maybe more. Only other people to have it are the Serbs.’

‘Serbs!’ Otto gasped. He stared questioningly at Johno.

Johno quietly explained, as he studied the screens, ‘My first mission into Bosnia was to recover it from a Serb’ base. We knew we didn’t get all of it. Blew up what we could. Only good thing to say about it is that it oxidises quickly. You could walk through the restaurant in an hour with no ill effects.’

He pointed at the screen. ‘That’s gel. It’s used to transport the nerve agent, too dangerous to carry it around in aerosol form unless you’re wearing a protective suit. And we would have noticed that. It was in that little can in gel form for safety, and the small explosion was needed to spread it around.’ He tapped the operator’s arm. ‘Focus on the bomb.’ The camera zoomed in. Johno pointed to the rear of the frame. ‘There. That seat has blown out.’

Others were calling up the image.

Otto studied it with a determined frown. ‘The bomb was at the rear of that seat, behind the fixed padding?’

‘Pan down,’ Johno suggested. ‘There, a timer with three pencil batteries. No damage, explosion too small. We may even get fingerprints off that.’

‘Timer?’ Otto repeated. ‘How long could it have been there?’

Johno gave a slight shrug. ‘With those batteries on a small timer, six weeks,’ he informed them.

Otto appeared stunned; to think that this device could have been there all that time. And it could have killed them all. ‘Why would the Serbs risk coming here a day before it

was due to go off. One small mistake and *they* would be killed.'

Johno sighed at Otto's naivety. 'Those Serb Ministers didn't know about this device. No way they would have sat around that table.'

'Another Serb group?' Otto posed.

'It's Serb nerve gas,' Johno pointed out. 'That don't mean they placed it there. Last I heard various terror groups were trying to buy the stuff from Bosnian Serbs.'

Otto repeated his request. 'All references to N20 or Serbian nerve gas, all agencies, top priority!'

'We already have a suspect,' Johno quietly pointed out. 'The man from over the lake.'

'He could not have entered!' Otto insisted.

'Maybe not, but he might know who did. I will *personally* have a word with him later.'

'No, you won't.' It was Beesely, stood a few steps behind. 'I will have a chat with our friend at the right time.' People moved respectfully out of his way, the noise level falling.

'You OK, Boss?' Johno asked.

'No.' Beesely navigated his way slowly through the staff to the computer screens, people edging out of his way. The images from the restaurant held his gaze for ten seconds. Pointing to a door directly ahead he quietly asked Otto, 'Does that lead to the control room?'

Otto confirmed that it did.

Beesely took a long slow breath and lowered his head. For a moment he closed his eyes. Placing a hand on the first computer operator's shoulder he ordered, 'I want all video footage of that chair for the past few weeks. I want to see the face of the man who planted that bomb. Otto, Johno, if you please, my office.'

'Sir?' Pepi's assistant called.

Pepi turned his head.

'The bomb has gone off, many dead, no details yet.'

Pepi turned back to his meal, now sat having lunch with his daughter. 'Keep me informed,' he casually requested.

'They will have to evacuate the castle,' his daughter stated without looking up.

Pepi nodded as he chewed. Taking in the view of his vineyard he said, 'They would have been better off with Gunter still in charge. This ... English actor, or whatever he is, has no idea of the history, or what factors are in play. Right now he will be flopping around like a fish out of water, wishing he was back in London at the retirement home.'

'Why do you think the Swiss brought him in?' she idly asked.

'Maybe Gunter fell ill. They could see that his will left K2 to the state, maybe they figured they needed to distance themselves from it.' He chuckled. 'Or maybe, after forty years, they've grown a backbone and want a fight.'

4

Despite prior standing orders, hardly relevant to today, all the staff in the command centre stopped what they were doing and watched Beesely as he made his way around the upper level and into his office.

'All managers,' he softly requested as he entered.

In a minute they were gathered, huddled in the doorway with notepads in hand.

'Seats, coffee,' Beesely ordered with a wave of his hand, Johnno sitting behind him on the cabinet. 'And some chocolate, please.' His voice trailed off to a whisper as he finished with, 'Blood sugar levels.' He took out his old fountain pen, made it ready and placed it on his notepad as section heads dragged chairs into a half-circle and settled down. Otto remained in the doorway, phone in his hand.

Beesely waited. When the room reached a noise level not far above silence he glanced up at Otto with a questioning expression. Otto simply waved the phone as he glanced out to the control room. Beesely nodded his understanding, rubbing

the bridge of his nose. 'Ladies and gentlemen.' He had to clear his throat. Then, starting again and talking softly, said, 'We have suffered a great tragedy today ... and a setback for the business. We ... are in the security business, so we should not suffer breaches of security. But the only area they managed to breach was the restaurant, just about the lowest security area. Still, if we had been having lunch on time then we would be the ones on those monitors.'

'We have lost seven people. For those of you who did not know, one of those was my daughter, Jane.' Looks of great shock and sadness were exchanged. Beesely continued, 'First, we have to contain this situation and make sure that no one else is in danger.'

Johno eased off the cabinet. 'Any intruder reports?' He noted only blank faces. 'Any gunfire, suspicious packages, vehicles?' He turned to Beesely, resting his hands on the desk. 'This was no distraction, nor an attack. It was just the bomb and our friend across the lake.'

Beesely's head remained lowered. 'Yes. Thank you,' he offered, barely above a whisper. Johno walked to the end of the office, hands in pockets, turned and ambled back.

'How long might that gas persist in there?' Beesely asked, the question meant for Johno.

'It's in gel form, so it could be there all bloody year. The gas released will go quickly, but the gel left will linger.'

'And the dangers outside the castle?'

'None. You'd have to touch it, get some on your skin.'

Beesely pressed, 'Are you completely sure?'

Johno made a face, giving a slight shrug. 'There's always the chance some of that gel got out in the blast. Outside it will evaporate slowly, quicker if in sunlight.' He made eye contact with Otto. 'Can we raise the temperature in the restaurant from here?'

'Yes, all air conditioning is controlled by the computers,' Otto replied.

'Can the temperature be raised to one-oh-two degrees Celsius?'

‘I would not think so, it was never designed to go so high.’

‘Then raise the temperature as much as possible, but no extractor fans running,’ Johno suggested.

Beesely rubbed the bridge of his nose. ‘What will that do?’

‘It will make the gel evaporate and release the nerve gas.’ Beesely raised his head. Johno continued, with his hands still in his pockets, ‘In that temperature the gas oxidises quickly. Give it a few hours and there will be sod all left. But in the short term the gas will be concentrated.’

Beesely asked Johno, ‘Is there any chance ... any at all... that those people may still be alive?’

‘If they were I’d stick a bullet between their eyes. Once you got that shit in your lungs or on your skin there’s no removing it.’

Beesely rubbed his forehead. Without looking up he said, ‘I want the outside world to think that we had a cooking gas explosion, an accident ... that killed six people—’

‘Seven,’ Johno corrected.

‘Seven people. Tell the local authorities that the building is unsafe, people are buried, but that we are dealing with it.’

Otto tapped a man on the shoulder and told him to take care of it.

‘We’re going to need a chemical clean-up team,’ Johno quietly, but firmly, pointed out.

Beesely turned his head to Otto. ‘Do the Swiss —’

‘No!’ Johno interrupted. ‘A proper team! That’s forty-year-old unstable nerve agent in gel. It needs a dedicated team. Yanks have them.’

Beesely took a sip of his coffee and a measured breath before pressing a button on his phone. He hesitated, glanced at Johno and Otto in turn then said, ‘Get me Burke, CIA, England.’ When a response came Beesely called, ‘Burke, this is Beesely.’

‘Hey, old buddy. I only just got back, still hung over. Love the Learjet, thanks for that and all your hospitality.’

‘Listen, we’ve suffered an attack.’

‘An attack? You OK? How’s Johnno?’

‘I’m here!’ Johnno shouted.

‘What happened?’ Burke asked.

Beesely explained, ‘Someone managed to slip a rather small device into our staff canteen, laced with nerve agent.’

‘Nerve agent? Jesus, you sure?’

Johnno rested his hands on the desk. ‘Elephant Man Symptoms, quick death, skin-blisters.’

‘Shit, that’s N20. Serbian!’

Johnno cut in, ‘Listen, Burke, we need a good forensic bomb analyst and a clean-up team, and we need them today!’

‘There’s a chemical weapons team in Germany,’ Burke informed them. ‘Hell, several of them.’

‘Get ‘em on a plane!’ Johnno shouted. ‘Full set of kit - tents, walkways, hoses, suits. First to third stage decontamination tents, chemical sprays and flame throwers.’

Beesely swung his head around at the suggestion of flame-throwers.

Burke replied, ‘Leave it to me. Get authorisation from the Swiss Government to let us land on that private strip, C130 transport or two, two-dozen staff. But I’ll have to make some calls, get clearance. You ready things your end.’

‘We will,’ Beesely offered. ‘Stay in touch.’ He hung up.

Otto sent a woman out of the room to tackle the Swiss Government.

‘Flame throwers?’ Beesely questioned.

Johnno explained, ‘The only way you remove gel is to burn it. And once you’ve finished with your decon’ suits and tents you burn them as well. One thing nerve gas don’t like is high temperatures.’

The phone buzzed. ‘Sir?’

Beesely leant forwards and pressed a button. ‘Go ahead.’

‘Sir, the head of Serbian Intelligence is on the line, Mr. Biljana.’

Beesely eased back into his chair, glancing from face to face.

‘How the hell does he know?’ Johno asked. ‘Someone else watching this place?’

Otto shook his head. ‘We can find no one!’

Beesely put a finger to his lips then waved a flat palm around the room. He pressed a button. ‘Put him through.’

‘Hello? Mister Beesely?’ came an accented voice.

‘Mr. Biljana, surprised to be hearing from you so soon.’

‘Is everything OK with you?’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘We had a strange message today, saying that you and your staff had been killed.’

‘Really, do you know who sent that message?’

‘No, it was taken by my secretary, no name or number. Are you all OK?’

‘We had a small gas explosion earlier, in the conference room. Someone managed to interfere with the gas supply to the cookers, gas built up between floors, and then a timed incendiary device went off.’

‘Was anyone hurt?’

‘We lost seven members of the catering staff.’

‘That’s terrible. These were the ladies who served us yesterday?’

‘Yes, they were.’

‘And this timer, you have it?’

‘Yes.’ Beesely glanced at Johno. ‘It was set incorrectly, a day too late.’

‘You mean, it was meant for us?’ Biljana queried.

‘For the meeting we had, yes,’ Beesely lied. ‘But I don’t think you, personally, were the target. I think we all were.’

‘Still, I was there, and I do not take these things lightly! My Government will hear of this. Our Ambassadors and Ministers were in that room.’

‘Well, anything you can do would be a great help,’ Beesely suggested.

‘Do you have any leads?’

‘We are holding a Serbian man who was caught spying on us with a large telescope.’

‘Serbian?’ Biljana gasped. ‘I want this man’s details! We have many dissident groups, any one of which might have wanted to kill our Ministers!’

‘We’ll send you what we know,’ Beesely calmly offered.

‘And I will then tell you what this man had for breakfast when he was in kindergarten!’

‘That’s good to know. Thanks.’ Beesely pressed END.

‘You believe him?’ Otto asked, stepping closer.

Beesely stared ahead. ‘They would not have sat down to talk knowing what was there. An old nerve agent, poor container, home made dodgy timer.’ He focused on Otto. ‘Would *you* risk it?’

Otto got called out of the office and handed a video still. Studying it intensely, he slowly rejoined the group.

‘Something?’ Beesely enquired.

Otto stopped and lifted his head. ‘The bomber.’

5

Otto showed the face in the photo towards the managers. Aghast at recognising it the first man ran out, Otto placing the photo onto Beesely’s desk. The black and white image meant nothing to Beesely. Johno glanced at it over Beesely’s shoulder, but again it meant nothing.

Beesely made eye contact with Otto. ‘You know him?’

‘Yes,’ Otto reluctantly answered. ‘He has been known to us for many years. His father was friendly with Gunter for all their lives, from the war. This man was a regular visitor when his father was in good health and when Gunter was staying at the castle. I stopped this man from visiting our bank after Gunter died -’

‘Why?’ Johno asked.

‘His father was a Nazi, and the son, Helmut, was in contact with many right-wing groups.’

‘But you let him in one last time?’ Johno asked, without blame.

Otto straightened and took a breath. 'He said he had information about right-wing groups that could be useful to us. When he came he only asked for money. I did not know he had visited the restaurant, but no one would have stopped him, he had been a regular visitor - known to all the staff.'

'I assume we know where to find him?' Beesely softly asked.

'We will find him,' Otto confidently suggested. 'His family have many houses in Switzerland and Bavaria.'

'Fire proof, are they?' Johno asked.

Otto slid his gaze across to Johno, then back to Beesely.

'It was not your fault,' Beesely informed him. 'Being betrayed by a friend is always hard to spot.' He pressed a button on the desk phone. 'Get me Duncan, English, newspaper reporter, mobile.' He raised his head to Otto. With quiet determination he ordered, 'I want every good field agent not working on something important to assemble in Switzerland.'

Otto walked outside and barked orders, an unusual display of emotion.

'Duncan here,' came from the desk phone.

Beesely leant forwards. 'Duncan, it's Beesely.'

'Good to hear from you, sir. I'm making good progress on our *project*. Thanks again for all your help.'

'Listen, need a favour. There's a million pounds on its way to you -' Beesely pointed a finger at a female manager, who immediately stepped out. '- and more to follow. British and European neo-Nazi groups: I want them under the spotlight, 'new threat', etc. I want some *very* unfavourable press on them, starting today. Understand?'

'Sure, leave it with me.'

'Talk soon, bye.'

Back in the office, Otto stepped forwards. 'We have good influence in newspapers in France, Germany, here, Austria -'

Beesely quickly ordered, 'Get them moving. We need the people of Europe angry and on our side before we strike back at anyone.'

Two managers were already on their satellite phones and stepping outside.

‘We need Mossad,’ Johnno suggested.

Beesely turned, a quizzical look. ‘Why?’

‘Last I heard some N20 had been sent to two of their Ambassadors. They spotted the packages and no one was hurt, but they must already have a good idea who it was.’

‘Yes,’ Beesely agreed, deep in thought. ‘Could save us a great deal of time.’ He pressed CALL. ‘Elle Rosen, Mossad, London, please.’ They waited.

‘Hello?’

‘Beesely here.’

‘Ah, how are you?’

‘Not so good, we’ve suffered an attack.’

‘An attack? Are you OK?’

‘We lost seven staff to a small bomb laced with N20 nerve agent.’

‘N20! My God, what area is contaminated?’

Johnno shouted, ‘It was in gel.’

‘Ah, the same method was used to attack our Ambassadors to Austria and France last year.’

‘Which is why we could use your help on this,’ Beesely stated.

‘Of course. What would you like from us?’

‘Send us a liaison officer, someone who has been working on this, with what information you have. Especially about the packages sent to your embassies.’

‘Where do you want to meet them?’

‘At our offices in Zug, Switzerland,’ Beesely suggested.

‘We have a decontamination team –’ Elle began.

‘The CIA are trying to get us a US Army team,’ Johnno shouted.

‘Ours are better. I insist, they will be despatched immediately - they are always on standby. I will call you in a few hours. Sit tight, my friend.’ He hung up abruptly.

‘Two is better than one, I guess,’ Beesely muttered.

‘Going to need it!’ Johno suggested. ‘Getting that room back and decontaminating the castle is going to be a bitch. Nerve gas can stick to the damp in the walls, burrow into stone. It’ll take a week at best.’

Beesely sipped his coffee and nibbled at some chocolate. ‘Let’s get all we have on this man Helmut. Draw up a list of primary associates, and then let’s try and figure out just who *exactly* ...would want to target us.’ Turning to Otto he asked, ‘Was Helmut capable of making that bomb timer?’

‘No,’ Otto replied, still looking shocked. ‘He has the poor education standards, always to live off his rich father.’

‘Is the father alive?’ Beesely asked.

‘In a hospital home for old people in Bavaria, if I remember correctly.’

‘Let’s make sure his condition *does not* improve,’ Beesely ordered. ‘His death will bring out Helmut, but make sure the death looks like natural causes. Get our people into that home and surrounding area. And let’s find the father’s Will if we can, there are a few families we could send the money to.’

Otto made it to an empty first floor guest room, just making it to the toilet before being violently sick. Spasm after spasm kept him firmly bent double, kneeling over the bowl. Gripping his tie he flushed away the smell several times, grabbing a towel and wiping his face, his eyes moist.

Finally, he felt well enough to stand, wiping the toilet seat with tissue and flushing it away. Running the cold-water tap and washing his face he was unable to rid himself of the feelings knotting his stomach.

Staring at his moist reflection for many seconds he asked of himself, ‘What have I done?’

6

Half an hour later, files were starting to be assembled in Beesely’s office. A white board had been set up with a family tree of Helmut and his known associates, Helmut’s

photograph at the centre. Some names had photos, many just a question mark in a circle.

Otto sat with Beesely, both sipping coffee, Otto looking drained and dispirited. Beesely looked a little better than he had done, now more angered and resolute than shocked.

‘Sorted,’ Johno announced as he entered.

‘What is?’ Beesely asked, barely above a whisper.

‘Got a hundred piglets on the way.’

Beesely shook his head. ‘Did you say ... piglets?’

Otto looked over his shoulder, a puzzled expression.

Johno explained, ‘Yeah, hundred of the porkers. Skin of a pig is the same as human skin, that’s why they use them for training surgeons, as well as combat medics. We used to shoot them, then try and save them - stitch them up. We’ll stick a pig in every room in the castle and every corridor, then every twenty yards outside. Any nerve agent will blister their skin and kill them. Best detector there is.’

Beesely turned to Otto. Quietly, he stated, ‘I often forget that he is a highly trained expert.’

Otto nodded, trying some of the chocolate. ‘I have arranged for a lorry to crash below the castle. We will say there is a chemical spill and evacuate the houses nearby.’

‘Yes, good idea,’ Beesely approved.

A lady manager entered carrying a file. ‘Sir, we have the details of the most recent transactions on Helmut Graf’s credit card.’

Otto stood and read the file that she held open for him. ‘Memmingen, Bavaria, not far from Munchen. And close to the hospital for his father, some thirty kilometres.’

‘Get our people up there,’ Beesely ordered, Otto handing back the file. The desk phone buzzed. ‘Yes?’

‘Swiss Interior Minister, sir.’

‘Put him through.’

‘Sir Morris?’

‘Yes, Minister Blaum.’

‘I am sorry to hear of the fire and your losses today. If there is anything you need, don’t hesitate to contact me.’

‘Thank you.’

‘We have been requested to grant permission for some American military aircraft to land at Zug, and now a strong request from Israel. May I enquire as to why these military aircraft need to come here?’

‘That gas explosion is just a cover, Minister. It was a nerve agent.’

‘Nerve agent! My God, what has happened?’ Blaum shouted.

‘Calm down, Minister. Someone planted a small bomb in our restaurant, laced with nerve gas.’

‘It was aimed at us yesterday?’ Blaum gasped.

‘No, it was planted many weeks ago. Maybe even six weeks ago.’

‘That was before your arrival,’ Blaum puzzled. ‘Who was the target?’

As Beesely spoke towards the desk phone he turned his gaze to Otto. ‘Otto was.’

‘Why would anyone want to harm Otto?’

‘Seems that Herr Gunter may have had close links to various neo-Nazi groups, especially a Bavarian group. After Gunter’s death –’

‘Otto cut ties with people like this,’ Blaum put in. ‘Yes, I know. But what about the contamination, we cannot keep this quiet!’

‘We do not want our enemies, nor our customers, to know about this. Nor, Minister, do you want tourists to know about it.’

‘Is it isolated? Contained?’

‘Yes, quite contained,’ Beesely insisted.

‘These Americans and Israelis –’

‘They are military specialists, coming here to deal with the contamination quietly and discreetly in a way that no one will ever know about.’

‘You can assure me there will be –’

‘I can assure you, Minister, that the fools who set this small bomb made mistakes in how they stored the nerve gas.’

It is isolated to one room, with very little chance of escape. We are evacuating the surrounding area and we have arranged for a lorry to spill a chemical load.'

'Yes, yes, that's a good idea. But I must come down and see things for myself. This is very serious!'

'As you see fit, Minister, you are always welcome. Please do not come down until after those planes land and prepare their equipment. Then we will be able to give you more information.'

'Very well, but tomorrow afternoon at the latest.' He hung up.

'I need to sleep for an hour,' Beesely informed them.

'There is a small room with beds –' Otto began.

'No, no. This chair reclines, quite comfortable. Wake me in exactly one hour. Thank you.'

Otto stepped to a side office and dialled Minister Blaum.

'Otto, what the hell is going on?' Blaum whispered. 'Nerve agent? The publicity will destroy K2 and everything we have worked for!'

'Then I believe we can know who is behind it. Really behind it.'

'You think...?'

'I do not know. But we know the man who planted the bomb, perhaps even why.'

'Can this be contained?' Blaum asked in a forced whisper.

'If the Americans send a decontamination team, I would hope so. But Minister, Beesely's *daughter* ... was just killed.'

'My God!' Blaum gasped. 'What ... what do you think he will do? Will he stay?'

'I do not know. Let us talk tomorrow, or later today.' He hung up, holding the phone for many seconds, breathing heavily and closing his eyes.

* * *

Mr. Grey lifted his mobile. 'Get me the chairman. Now!' He had to wait, pacing his hotel room in Zurich. 'Sir? Someone just tried to take out Beesely and his entire command staff in on ego. Damn nerve agent was used.'

'Is he still in place?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Are his staff OK?'

'Yes, sir. But the girl, his secretary, and some others killed.'

'Close in, we'll step up things here.'

The chairman lowered the phone, ashen-faced, and stubbed out his cigar. 'God damn it. It was all going so damn well.'

'What is it?' Henry O'Sullivan enquired.

'Someone just tried to take out Beesely and all his people in one go. Canister of nerve gas.'

Henry grew confused and concerned, but for a different set of reasons to the chairman. 'Nerve gas? That can only be government level! Someone is trying to remove Beesely from our influence.'

The chairman nodded his agreement, glancing out of the window and thinking hard.

'Serbs?' a man asked.

The chairman turned back. 'A day after he just gave them everything they wanted? Doubtful.'

'Russians?' Henry tentatively enquired.

Oliver regarded his number two. 'Let's not speculate until we have some facts.'

Second wind

1

Otto gently woke Beesely, offering fresh tea.

Beesely rubbed his eyes. 'Anything new?'

'We have the mobile phone details from our Serbian spy. There are frequent calls to and from a woman, a nurse. She is not known to the authorities or to Interpol, but her boyfriend is a Herr Rudenson. He is well known as a collector of money for political groups, nationalist groups around Europe.'

'A fundraiser,' Beesely stated as he stared up at the ceiling. Otto nodded to himself. Beesely lowered his head and focused on Otto. 'Would he have the knowledge to make a bomb and get hold of some nerve agent?'

'Yes, most definitely. He has links to Serb nationalists and Serb groups in Bosnia. Also he has been arrested many times in Germany, once for possessing a gun and one time for making the small bombs.'

Beesely made strong eye contact with Otto. 'And his link to Helmut Graf?'

Otto sighed. 'They are well known to each other, yes.'

'I would like a list ... of all the groups that he has ever been connected to ... then a members' list of each. I don't care who you have to pay or shoot, just get the lists. Then everywhere he has ever lived, people he has known. 'This Rudenson - any allegiances higher up? Countries or groups?'

Otto shook his head. 'A petty thief and nationalist.'

'Are we making *every* effort to check that?'

'We have everyone working on this, we are finding a lot of information.' He was about to leave when he stopped and turned, his head lowered. 'There is something else.' Beesely could see that Otto was clearly upset. 'The bomb detonated at thirty-five seconds after one o'clock.' He choked the last few words out. 'Jane's satellite tracker was activated at one-oh-one, and twenty seconds, today. She pressed the red button ... and held it.'

Beesely could see Otto's eyes misting over. But it took a moment for what he was intimating to sink in. 'Oh God,' he whimpered. 'She struggled. She tried to use her phone...'

With the office now empty Beesely remembered the first meeting with Otto, when he handed Jane her phone. 'Hold the red button down and we can find you, wherever you are.'

Johno stepped in a minute later, noticing Beesely's crushed demeanour. He sat on the desk and sighed quietly. 'Didn't we promise ourselves we wouldn't get into this situation again? So much for life dealing us four aces.' Beesely slowly inched his head up, his eyes half closed. Johno softly asked, 'Feel like rewinding and giving back that hand of aces?'

'The only way is forwards,' Beesely muttered, lowering his head. 'We play the hand. But now we raise the stakes. In poker terms, we go *all-in*.'

* * *

A pleasant afternoon greeted the nurse when she stepped out for a break, the grounds of the Bavarian hospital blooming with bright flowers. She walked slowly up and around to her favourite spot, a good view past the hospital and down the valley to the hills in the distance.

As she sat on a bench and opened her bag she suddenly became aware that she was now in shade, two men stood over her. Something was sprayed into her mouth. She coughed, unable to speak – or cry out. A gun. Two quiet shots. Pain. She looked down, her knees covered in blood, white bone sticking out.

'Tell your boyfriend, Rudenson, that we are looking for him.'

They took her bag, her phone, snatching her lunch as an afterthought.

* * *

The house stood isolated, a quarter of a mile across a wooded valley from the nearest neighbour, many trees helping to both hide and shade it. A dog stood tethered to the porch, barking at the strangers.

‘We have everything useful out of the house?’

Another man nodded as two cars pulled away.

A call was made. ‘Operations. Everything useful has been removed.’

As his car bumped along a track of dried mud the K2 operative lifted an electronic detonator. He glanced at the driver then pressed the button.

The nearest neighbours rushed out, their hillside houses well above that of Rudenson’s. The sound of the explosion echoed around the valley, shaking their houses, breaking windows and travelling a great distance. A huge plume of smoke rose from the trees, swirling in the air currents of the valley floor. Rudenson’s dog no longer barked.

2

It was a fifteen-minute drive to where the Serbian ‘spy’ was being held. A uniformed local police officer manned the entrance to a farm and waved them through; three Range Rovers, eight agents heavily armed. The convoy halted outside a small barn, the agents from the first and third vehicles jumping down and spreading out in all directions. Another guard opened the barn door and stuck his face out, checking everyone as diligently as he could in the fading light.

Beesely slowly stepped down, helped by Johnno, and entered the outbuilding. It took a while to adjust to the darkness. ‘A little more light please,’ he ordered.

The Serb sat naked, strapped to a chair in the middle of the room, the rest of the furniture consisting only of a table with a TV screen and a few chairs. As the illumination increased, via some gas-lamps, Beesely took a flimsy-looking chair and placed it down in front of the prisoner.

A punch from Johno, straight to the man's ear, knocked the man, and the strapped-on chair, into the dirt. Despite being gagged the prisoner managed a loud groan. Beesely sat down, facing the prisoner.

'Sorry about that,' Johno offered, unconvincingly.

'Oh, my dear boy, these things happen.' The prisoner got lifted upright. Now Beesely could see blood around the man's mouth and nose, a prominent swelling underneath one eye. 'But I have always believed that things in life should always be kept in balance.' He pointed to the other ear.

Johno quickly knocked the man the opposite way, again to the floor.

'I do hope this does not impair his hearing,' Beesely dryly commented.

After being righted again the prisoner sat struggling, trying hard to say something through his gag.

Beesely turned and tapped the TV. 'Have they been showing you what we do to people we don't like? Well, not to worry, you'll be dead before dawn anyway and - to tell you the truth - pain is only a problem if you live to remember it.'

He pointed. 'You see Johno here? He carries around a lot of pain. Been carrying it for a long time. And me, well, I've been carrying my pain around for forty years. You see, young man, I had a daughter. Problem was I let my work come first and ... well, I did not raise the child. She was raised by her mother, poor soul, and a long list of unsuitable surrogate fathers. One of them, well, he raped her many times -'

Johno straightened and focused on Beesely, never having known that fact. In a dark corner two agents glanced at each other.

'- when she was just twelve years old. When she complained ... he beat her and her poor mother. It was almost a year before I found out, but then of course I did something about it. I killed the man of course, I beat him until his ribs were like rubber. He had problems breathing after the first few ribs.' He inspected his hand. 'You know, I did not realise

until later that I had broken my hand in three places. Still, when you are angry you don't feel the pain.'

A signal to Johnno resulted in the man being knocked down and righted again.

'And pain is what it's all about. I carried that pain for forty years because I was not there for her. And today she was murdered. My daughter was murdered, and not in a very pleasant way. She was subjected to a large dose of Serbian nerve agent.'

The man's eyes widened as he tried hard to say something through the gag, shaking his head.

'Yes, she was killed in that explosion today, the one that you were sent to watch out for.' He took a long, deep breath. 'You see, right now, young man, I do not really care if I live or die, let alone what happens to you. And Johnno here, he was close to my daughter. I dare say he's a little upset right now.' A nod from Beesely and the man was soon knocked over and quickly righted. 'Take off his gag.'

As Johnno stood to one side the gag was cut still in place, slicing the skin on the man's neck, the prisoner now panting furiously and straining to get air. Beesely crossed his legs and rested his hands on his knee.

'I did nothing!' the man protested, gasping for air.

'That's almost correct. You did very little, simply watched us and waited for the bomb to go off.'

The prisoner was about to say something when Johnno ripped his ear clean off, his screams filling the room.

'Johnno, do you mind, I was having a nice little chit-chat.'

'Sorry, Boss.' Johnno tossed the ear to the feet of the guards.

'So rude. Anyway, let's talk about ... *you*. You see, if you can provide me with some useful information about who you work with, then maybe we will spare your suffering. And more importantly, we will make the people who sent you here suffer.' Beesely idly brushed dust off his trousers. 'Now, who is Mark Rudenson?'

'He ... he paid me to come here,' the prisoner panted.

‘To do what?’ Beesely asked.

‘To ... to watch the top of the castle and say ... say when there was an explosion. It was ... was to be on the 31st, but he ... he wanted me hidden before ... and after.’

‘And then what were you going to do? Simply go back and confirm that there had been an explosion?’

‘Yes ... yes.’

‘And what does this ... Rudenson do for a living?’ Beesely asked.

‘Living?’

‘Work, what work does he do?’ Beesely clarified.

‘He is ... as you say ... fundraiser. Politics.’

Beesely checked his nails. ‘And where would we find him?’

‘Munchen.’

‘And what type of groups does he raise money for? In Munchen.’

‘For ... for nationalists.’

Beesely focused on the prisoner. ‘You mean neo-Nazis? German neo-Nazi groups?’

‘Yes ... and ... and for others.’

‘Other groups? Which groups?’

‘In Austria, Czech Republic. Many places.’

‘Well, here is the sixty-four million dollar question. Why does he want the people in the castle dead?’

‘There was a man ... a rich man ... old man ... he was to give a lot of money ... to us ... but he died. His son ... his son has the money ... and would not talk to Rudenson.’

‘Ah, I see. Gunter had promised your group money.’ With a loud sigh Beesely stood up. ‘Now I understand.’ He stepped into the cool night air. Approaching the vehicles he forced several deep breaths, rubbing his face. Johnno joined him, inspecting the blood on his knuckles. Beesely gazed up at the first few stars to appear. ‘He’s just a pawn, a part-time amateur who does not deserve *the chair*.’ He lowered his gaze and turned to Johnno. ‘Just kill him.’

Johno stepped back inside, drawing his weapon, the guards jumping out of the way. As Beesely took in the cool night air a single shot rang out, muffled within the barn. Returning to Beesely's side Johno said, 'I want Rude-son-features.'

'You shall have him, my boy. All in good time.'

On the way back Beesely dialled Otto, who sounded as if he had been asleep. 'Did I disturb you?'

'No, I am OK,' Otto whispered.

'Tell me, what's significant about the 31st, if you were planting a bomb long before I arrived here? What normally happens on the 31st?'

'The 31st? Nothing.'

'Perhaps the last day of each month then?'

'Ah, when Gunter was alive he always had staff reviews and sometimes punishment on the last day of the month. He used the restaurant.'

'Would most people know this?'

'Yes, he did this for many years.'

'And when he died, you continued to do this?'

'Yes, for two months, then I stopped,' Otto explained.

'But the people planting the bomb did not know that you stopped, stopped meeting on the last day at one o'clock.'

Otto paused. 'It is correct, yes.'

'So now we know.' Beesely pondered on what might be going through Otto's mind. 'Our visitor confessed ... about Rudenson, he was behind the bomb. Seems he was angry at you for not giving him money for his groups.'

Otto took a long time replying. 'I am sorry,' he offered.

'Sorry? No one is blaming you, Otto. Everything you have done since Gunter's death has been well meant, especially breaking the banks ties with these right-wing groups. No, my lad, you could not have seen this coming. We'll talk later, get some rest.'

'And the Serb man?'

'Johno released some anger.'

‘I see.’

Beesely lowered the phone, staring down at it.

‘Problem?’ Johnno asked as they approached the main road through Zug, the lake in view.

Beesely glanced out of the car window. ‘I had a feeling that the attack was someone else. Strange relief.’

‘We expecting trouble?’

‘Just remembered something ... something I should have remembered before. Stay armed. Even in the shower.’

Johnno studied the side of Beesely’s head. ‘How will I know *who* to worry about?’

Beesely faced him. ‘They’ll be the ones shooting at us.’

Johnno nodded, raising his eyebrows. ‘Handy.’

In an empty barrack-room canteen they sat drinking tea. Beesely studied Johnno for a moment.

‘What?’ Johnno finally asked.

‘When I got this inheritance, I actually thought for a brief foolish moment that maybe we would be on easy street, that maybe you and Jane would be taken care of after my death.’ He forced a stifled laugh. ‘But, Jane’s death has done some good after all.’

Johnno offered Beesely a puzzled look. ‘It has?’

Beesely made strong eye contact, a cold stare. ‘Yes, it’s woken me up inside.’

Johnno’s expression suggested further clarification was needed.

‘I don’t have many more years left, even fewer with my faculties intact, so I’m going to cause some trouble. I’m going to make use of this place and the money. You see, Jane’s death reminded me ... reminded me that there are people out there, groups out there that we should be attacking – not least for the greater good of the planet. I’m not worried about my own safety, or incarceration, nor am I too worried about your life. If *you* have no interest in living, why should I argue with you?’

‘Fair enough,’ Johnno said with a smirk.

‘So we’re going to war, probably get ourselves killed.’

‘And ... Otto?’

‘He’s the problem, and my concern. He has a life, a valuable life and good prospects. I can’t send him off with some money, we need him to run this place. So, we are going to have to fight a good fight, without getting killed or caught.’

Johnno tipped his head. ‘Is that all?’ he sarcastically asked.

Beesely sighed. ‘I’m going to have to be clever, at seventy-nine years old. And you ... you used to be one of the best, so start remembering what it’s all about. Put your boots back on, Sergeant Williams. But, there is one thing that may spoil my plans, something that has been nagging at me since we got here.’

‘What’s that?’

‘All the security around here ... that Gunter set-up. Underground bunker, old castle in the country, fifty well-armed guards. He had more protection than the Queen. So, who did he fear attacking him?’

‘He fucked off plenty of people, like the mafia.’

‘The mafia are not capable of launching an attack on this scale. You’d need a hundred commandos to get in here, and you’d lose most of them.’ He sighed ‘No, you’d only need this much security if you had upset a foreign government, someone capable of charging in here. But that doesn’t make a lot of sense either. What foreign power would risk an incursion on Swiss soil – heart of bleeding Europe?’

‘Gunter ... ain’t here now, so not a problem,’ Johnno firmly pointed out.

Beesely took a breath. ‘Yes, you’re probably right.’

It's not what you know, it's who you know

1

At 3am Beesely's convoy pulled onto the private airstrip. He softly ordered, 'Let's see if we can move this lot before first light, then keep them out of sight of the locals.'

As they emerged from the side of the control tower the airstrip suddenly seemed a lot smaller. Two American C130 transports were already unloading under lights rigged up by their crews and powered by their aircraft; a single engine on each plane ticking over. Trucks, buses and cars were standing by, armed guards everywhere.

The convoy stopped next to the small waiting room, twenty yards from the control tower. Beesely wound down a window, suddenly blasted by the noise of the aircraft's engines, the strong odour of aviation fuel and the sound of another aircraft landing.

'That is the Israeli plane,' Otto pointed out.

Coming in to land, with its landing lights blazing, came a C130 'stretch', painted - unfortunately for stealth - all white. It touched down with a roar just a few seconds later, ground controllers with illuminated orange wands directing it around the back of the other C130s. Otto tapped the driver's shoulder and the convoy resumed its progress.

Beesely made a point of welcoming and thanking many of the American crew, explaining that they would try and move everything under cover of darkness. Then, as soon as the equipment was clear, the planes could take off again. The American team leader, a Captain, had been asked to board the second Range Rover with the Israeli team-leader, an Army Major, joining him.

As the convoy left the darkened airfield, Israeli pilots stood with folded arms kicking the wheels of American

aircraft, all the pilots now huddled together as jokes about 'size matters' bounced around.

* * *

'This, gentlemen, is temporary command headquarters for decontamination,' Beesely quietly explained, fighting his fatigue. 'We have kicked out the usual occupants and there are more than enough rooms and beds for you all, showers and a canteen area. Food will be brought in, along with anything else you require. Americans ground floor, Israelis first floor, or sort it out between yourselves. We have five star hotels available for you, but security must be maintained - no one must know you are here. Brief your men, no calls home discussing this place. You are all on exercise ... somewhere else.'

'Is this a Swiss Army base?' the American Captain asked, standing in full fatigues, beret and shiny boots, his hands on hips. 'I mean, you're British, these guys speak German and we're in Switzerland?'

'No, not Swiss Army,' Beesely explained. '*We* ... are a private security agency with close working links with British Intelligence, CIA and Mossad. Similar work, but shorter hours and better pay. Were you not briefed?'

'Hah! I'm a soldier. I get briefed on what to do a short time after someone realises that we're being shot at.'

'Yes, of course. I was a soldier myself, France and Korea.'

'France?' the Captain asked, a slight frown forming. 'When was there a war in France?'

Beesely's eyes narrowed, focusing on the Captain. '1939 to 1945, old chap.'

'Oh, yeah, right. *That* war.'

Beesely gave the man an impatient look. 'If you'll take a seat, Johno will brief you. We have photographs, plus a

live feed to the contaminated room. It's the top floor of a very old castle.'

Guards brought in food and drink, the officers settling around a large table. Beesely excused himself, heading for a five-star hotel and Spa that he apparently owned.

Johno rubbed his eyes. 'OK, listen up, gentlemen. My name is Johno, welcome to Schloss Diane. That's Castle Diane for those that don't know. I'm head of security here... and personal bodyguard to Sir Morris Beesely.'

'Were you hurt in the bomb blast?' the Captain asked.

Johno did not understand at first, the Captain pointing at his knuckles. 'No, I killed a man last night,' he flatly explained.

'Ya beat him to death?' the Captain joked.

Johno examined his knuckles. 'Wish I had. But I was ordered to kill him quickly.' He stared down at the American.

The man turned to the Israeli Major. 'He's joking, right?'

With tired eyes, the Major answered. 'No, my friend, I believe he is not.'

The Captain stopped smiling.

'Beesely's daughter took a full dose of N20. I knew her almost twelve years.'

The Captain looked horrified. 'His daughter was killed?'

'And six women who worked here, had children at home in the local town. We on the same page, Captain?'

'Hey, sorry man.'

'To business. I'm formerly British Intelligence, formerly SAS, before that Parachute Regiment.'

The Major asked, 'You studied chemical warfare? They said there was a specialist already here.'

Johno nodded. 'SAS.'

The Major commented, 'I saw the piglets.'

‘We have them everywhere, especially all the rooms in the castle.’

‘Any symptoms so far?’ the Major asked.

‘None, not even outside the door. Been fourteen hours odd.’

‘The gel has helped us there,’ the Major commented.

Johno showed them a photo. ‘That’s the bomb.’

‘It’s just a standard deodorant can,’ the Captain commented, his counterpart agreeing.

Johno placed down a photo of the timer. ‘The timer they used.’ Next came a plan of the room. ‘That’s the restaurant. The walls are six feet thick, stone, the windows extra strong and bullet-proof. But there’s wood above, lots of it, empty spaces above that in the spires. Floor is concrete, solid enough. We’ve had the heaters on in there, roughly a hundred Fahrenheit.’

‘Good,’ the Major enthused. ‘It will have oxidised a lot of the N20. But I am surprised the pig outside the door is not showing any symptoms with warm gas in there.’

‘Fire doors. Solid.’

‘The bodies are still inside?’ the Major asked.

Johno slowly nodded, studying the man. ‘Not pleasant, all heads and hands twice as big as normal.’

‘The swelling will go down after death, maybe twelve to twenty-four hours,’ the Major commented.

Johno took a breath. ‘OK, first things first. The corridor outside is large and long, perfect for a tent and stage one decon’. Down the fire stairs and out onto the grass, stage two. Five yards and you are on the tarmac, stage three.’

‘I’d like to see stage three well away from main zone,’ the Captain suggested. ‘No one walking unsuited within a hundred yards. And then upwind.’

‘You’re the experts, you decide. Just move quickly. Please. Your men and your kit will be here in ten minutes, so I’ll show it to you from a distance.’ They stood.

‘You have incinerators close by for the bodies?’ the Major asked, Johno nodding. ‘Can they be used for contaminated materials as well?’ the Major added.

‘There’s an industrial incinerator in the town, we’re clearing a route for trucks. It’s big enough to get furniture in.’

‘Your people have suits?’ the Captain enquired as they stepped out into the dark camp.

‘Yeah, and we can get hold of anything you need.’

The Captain turned his head. ‘Start with a shit load of industrial bleach, fine lime powder and rig up some outdoor shower areas, boot washing areas, hand washing areas on the main gate.’

Johno offered, ‘I’ll assign a senior guard to you. Ask for anything you need, money is no object around here.’

With the American Captain walking towards the castle for a better view, Johno made eye contact with the Israeli Major through the dark. Talking softly he said, ‘This is Switzerland, Major, full of big strapping Aryans – especially within K2. They’re all very disciplined, but... Israelis being here will be an eye-opener for some.’ The Major nodded his understanding. ‘If there are any comments, or problems, you find me – and I’ll shoot the fucker.’

At the small Zug airfield, Technical Sergeant Grey helped unloading equipment, none of his colleagues aware of just who he really was.

2

With a plastic cup of coffee containing a little milk, and a lot of sugar, Johno walked up the compound road, still in the clothes he’d worn the day before - the same black suit. It seemed quiet, none of the usual training going on, a slight mist hanging in the chill air. Dawn was breaking

somewhere behind the hills. A group of American soldiers walked by. Johno ambled slowly up to within a hundred yards of the castle and stopped next to the first spaceman.

‘Hey, morning,’ the American Captain called from within his dark orange suit. He stood holding his umbilical as if a tail.

‘How’s it going?’ Johno asked, clearing his throat and fighting to stay awake. The stage-three decontamination tent was so well camouflaged he almost did not spot it in the trees, only brought to his attention by another orange-suited man emerging.

‘We got the bodies out,’ the Captain reported, his words distorted by the suit. ‘Covered in lime and bagged, decon’ one and then hermetically sealed caskets before decon’ two and three.’

Johno nodded, deep in thought. ‘Where are they now?’ he asked, barely above a whisper.

‘Went on the truck two hours ago.’

Johno turned, forcing his eyes open. ‘They’re gone?’

‘Incinerator. No time.’

Johno breathed the cold, misty air, glancing at the dead calm lake surface through a gap in the trees. ‘The remains?’

‘Can’t let you have them, it’s still a risk. You know that.’ The Captain studied the back of Johno’s head. ‘We’ve burnt the air. Tests showed very little gas. Found high readings in the carpets, so they were ripped up, limed and bagged, been incinerated as well. We’re burning all the surfaces now, working in one hour shifts inside, groups of four.’

Without looking around Johno said, ‘Gut everything. Rip out all the fittings until you’re down to bare stone walls, then burn them.’

‘Should be at that stage by tonight, Israeli boys working like demons in there. Dozen of your boys suited up and helping to lug stuff around, saving us time.’ As the Captain

observed him, Johno sipped his coffee and stared ahead. 'Sorry about Mr. Beesely's daughter, we had to move them out first.'

Johno turned. '*You* didn't kill her.' As he walked off he quietly added, 'And I wasn't there when she needed me.'

The path down to the lake was now eerily quiet; one guard on duty at a hut, another at the lower gate. Pausing, Johno gazed up at the trees, observing the light mist swirling through the branches, moistening the leaves before drifting down towards the lake. At the lake's edge he stopped and sat on a log, the sound of small waves rippling against the shore, a beach scene in miniature. Gentle footsteps approached.

Johno forced his head up, to see Ricky walking slowly down. Saying nothing, Ricky stepped to where his shoes were getting lapped, crouching down and running the fingers of one hand through the cold water. He studied the wet fingers for a moment before rubbing them across his forehead. He sat next to Johno without a word, a few seconds passing.

'Where ya been?' Johno finally croaked out.

'Brazil,' Ricky answered, just above a whisper. 'Rich client had his kid snatched. We were negotiating with the kidnappers holed up in a villa, couple of dumb ass local boys. When I heard what had happened here I stormed the place by myself, just a pistol. Took 'em by surprise, killed three. Boy had been long dead. Twelve hours and four flights to get back here.'

Johno nodded, lighting up.

After two drags Ricky took the cigarette out of Johno's mouth, puffed then returned it. 'How's the old man?'

'Not so good.'

Ricky nodded to himself as he thought. 'To be expected.'

Johno stared out across the lake. ‘Once ... once I was at the end of an exercise, just walking across the north side of Pen-y-fan, middle of winter, foot of snow. Had to get down the north side to that little camp, Cwmgwdi. I had plenty of time, well ahead of schedule. The top of the snow had frozen, so every footstep was a *crunch* –’

Ricky smiled and nodded, taking the cigarette again.

‘- and the wind stopped ... and the clouds broke a bit so the moon just suddenly lit this area like a floodlight being switched on. And there I stood, flat area, dead calm all of a sudden. Snow was brilliant grey-white, no noise. I took off my headgear and just stopped. Just stopped and looked around, thinking how beautiful it was and ... and how lucky people like us were to experience stuff that like ... stuff that civvies never get to experience.’

Ricky nodded. ‘Yeah, we’ve seen some strange things in our time. Remember that field in Kosovo, flat open field with knee-high flowers, bathed in the moonlight? And us two stupid sods making our way across, clear as daylight for anyone to see. And that cow, right in the middle, stood fast sleep. We went right past it and it didn’t even see us.’

‘I wanted to stop and tie its legs together with rope before it woke.’

‘Yeah, idiot. Bleeding to death and wanting to play jokes.’

Johno gazed up at the trees and the mist. ‘It’s how we cope - try not to take things too seriously. Otherwise you end up too tight, or going mad. Often wonder how those bomb disposal boys do it. Spent a night in a shed with one in the Falklands. In the morning he got up, took a blanket off the live bomb he had been working on and asked the rest of us to leave. Stupid wanker. But if he had told us about it we would have been sleeping in the wet.’

‘Why did you learn to fly?’

Johno took a drag. ‘When you were a trooper, did you go down to that little civvy airstrip, Shobdon, near Leominster?’

‘Couple of times, parachuted there after work.’

‘So did we, when I was first *badged*. In fact, I think before that. We used to go down there in a truck after work, bunch of us, early on a Friday. Parachuted with that school run by old Mac’ McCarthy. Anyway, I had this notion that if I was behind enemy lines and needed to get out I’d steal a frigging plane, fly low and Bob’s yer uncle. They had a flying school there, so I used up a chunk of my pay for lessons. Had sod all else to spend it on.’

‘I flew a Cessna across the English Channel once, under the radar,’ Ricky idly commented

Johno turned and stared hard. ‘That was you?’

‘Shhh, ain’t no one supposed to know, especially not the French.’

‘Shit. I heard rumours.’ Johno took a drag. ‘Why ... exactly?’

‘Joint exercise with the Frogs. What I didn’t know was that one of their officers was ex-Foreign Legion. I topped his best buddy in the Congo, plus a few other Frogs - can’t say why. Anyway, this guy recognised me. Let’s just say I had to *survive, escape and evade* - as it says in the manual. Jumped on a train across France like some Second World War black and white movie, got near Normandy and spotted an airfield.’

‘So you nicked a Cessna?’ Johno puzzled.

‘Not at first, they were all locked or out of fuel and I got spotted. But the idea was there, so I got a map, hunted around for little airfields, found one with a Cessna taxiing for take-off. Not something you expect, being smacked in the mouth and dragged out of your plane. Only way to be sure it was fuelled and not locked. Flew it under several high-voltage power cables, down to fifty feet across the Channel and landed it on a road near Poole.’

‘Crazy bastard...’

They shared another cigarette.

‘Did she suffer?’ Ricky asked.

Johnno passed the cigarette as he thought. ‘Worst death you could imagine. Probably tried to claw the skin off her own face.’

Ricky shook his head.

‘Did she tell you *the joke*?’

Ricky interest was piqued. ‘No?’

‘Well, it made her and the old man laugh. Proud of that joke she was. But like a lot of really good one-liners she probably never even meant it, it just came out - the right words at the right time.’ He took a breath. ‘I was trying to kill moles in the lawn ... with a 9mm pistol.’

Ricky slowly turned his head.

Johnno glanced back at him from under his eyebrows. ‘Yeah, OK, not the best of ideas. But the little bastards were doing my head in. We’d tried poison and traps and everything. Anyway, I had a go for an hour, sure they were ready to surrender. Gave them a headache at least. When I came back up to the old house she asked me how I got on. Told her the bad news. Then she just came out with it. Suggested I might do better if I was *camouflaged*.’

Ricky smiled widely.

Johnno gave him an embarrassed look. ‘Well, Beesely laughed so much he fell over. We still don’t know to this day if she knew they were blind, or was just taking the piss out of me. If Beesely had said it you would have known it was a piss-take. She wasn’t known for being the brightest tool in the box, but she adopted that joke as her own after that.’

‘*Sharpest* ... tool in the box,’ Ricky corrected, an eyebrow raised.

Johnno frowned as he thought. ‘Sharpest tool?’

‘I’ll be off now.’ Ricky stood, still smiling. ‘Driving to Bavaria.’ Johnno stared hard at his friend. ‘Before you ask,

your job's here, making sure Beesely stays in one piece. He's more valuable than you realise, especially with K2 behind him.' Ricky put a hand on the back of his friend's neck, stared into his eyes for a long moment then left.

From a hundred yards away, through the trees, Technical Sergeant 'Grey' accepted a cigarette from a guard, watching Ricky walk off as Johnno sat smoking.

* * *

Pepi noted the disturbed look on his assistant's face as the man stepped briskly into his study, the man not waiting for permission to speak.

'Sir, the American Army and the Israeli Army have sent specialist chemical decontamination teams to K2.'

Pepi stood, staring back, his mouth slowly opening.

His assistant continued, 'There has been no evacuation, the Swiss Government have not lodged any complaints or action, and K2's headquarters are expected to be decontaminated in a matter of only a few days.'

Pepi walked around the window, his brow furrowed. 'Israelis?' He turned, the morning sun warm on the back of his neck. 'Who does K2 blame for the bomb?'

'German neo-Nazi groups, sir, as expected. The man, Rudenson.'

Pepi took a breath and calmed himself. 'And what do our people in the Swiss Government think about these... English?'

The aid hesitated, noticed by Pepi. 'They are very positive towards this man Beesely.'

Pepi lowered his head. 'That ... was not to be expected.'

'Something else, sir.' Pepi lifted his eyes. 'They have begun recruiting former British SAS soldiers for the training of K2 staff and agents. Colonel Alonso has made an assessment of K2's new strength, and capabilities,

increasing that assessment four-fold with the new training schedules they have started.'

Pepi smiled, giving a gentle nod. 'The Swiss have been clever. They knew this man Beesely would bring in British staff.'

'And his bodyguard is former SAS, sir. He has done the recruiting.'

'His bodyguard ... is an ill-disciplined, drunken, womanising, overweight *has-been*.'

'His bodyguard, sir, is apparently one of a very few select experts in N20 nerve gas,' the aid cautiously countered with.

Pepi stepped quickly to his assistant, frightening the man. Stopping and lowering his head Pepi forced a big breath, rubbing his chin. 'I have never believed ... in coincidence. God ... seems to be making this game a challenge for us.' He made eye contact. 'Go,' he snapped at the man as he walked around his desk, lifting the phone.

Finally he said, 'Sir, an interesting ... problem.'

Sending a message

1

Otto entered Beesely's office looking recovered and fresh. Beesely sat drinking coffee and nibbling on his chocolate, his shoulders hunched forwards. Otto began, 'I have prepared a response for those people who knew Helmut Graf, his family and friends.'

'Response?' Beesely repeated, lifting his head and squinting without his glasses.

'K2 is Swiss, and the people here know not to make problems for us. Graf did so. Now we must make an example of him and his friends and family – both here and Bavaria.'

Beesely stared ahead for a moment. 'So that they know *who* ... they are dealing with,' he suggested. 'Yes, that makes sense. Like 'getting the chair' - power is no good if no one knows that you have it.'

Otto placed several sheets of paper in front of Beesely, explaining, 'What we do ... must be talked about for many years to come. A clear message.'

Beesely glanced at Otto from under his eyebrows then read the detail.

* * *

Colonel Golon, DGSE Paris, read the report, his deputy stood waiting.

Finally he looked up. 'This man Beesely makes a phone call ... and the Americans and Israelis land in Zug?'

'Yes, sir,' the aid pointedly agreed.

'And no attempt by the British to search for the treasure?'

'None, sir. No mention, no interest.'

Colonel Golon placed down the report. 'It is early days yet.'

'Sir, intelligence suggests that they are planning attacks on right wing and Nazi groups, revenge for the nerve gas attack. Do we ... do anything?'

'Not without risking our sources.'

'Another matter, sir. We have noticed the CIA making contact with several criminal gangs ... here, in Paris. They are preparing an action, which seems to be directed towards K2.'

Golon eased back, a perplexed gaze on his face. 'They go to assist K2, then they attack them? That makes little sense, Pascal.'

'Could the Americans know about *the list*?'

Golon stood, his concern clearly evident. He was about to say something, then checked himself. Turning to his office window he looked down at the enclosed courtyard. 'If ... K2's castle was attacked, then that would not be a bad thing, if the result was that the castle was vacated, or that the newspapers exposed K2. Having K2 in place in the centre of Europe is a concern. After all, it is a privately run criminal organisation, strangely tolerated by the Swiss.'

'We both know that the Swiss Government is weak. The banks *own* the government there.'

Golon turned, nodding his agreement, a slight shrug.

'Do we do anything ... if the Americans attack?'

'No, is the simple answer. We watch and wait, our long term goal to see the castle in someone else's hands, then searched thoroughly.'

* * *

'Police! Hello? My name is Stella Graf, come quick, someone has filled my house with concrete!'

What? No, I did not order the concrete.

Workmen, no - listen - the concrete is inside my house. I cannot go into the house, the doors and windows they are solid.

Yes, I have my door key.

You do not understand, my house, it has been destroyed.

No, it is still standing.

No, I am not lying.

No, not vandalised. Concrete. Concrete!

What, complain about the workmen? There are no workmen!

What? Ask the workmen to return? Are you crazy, my house is ruined!

Legal action? Trading standards bureau? No! I don't want to complain, I want the police.

I know police cannot be involved in poor building work.

What, am I related to Helmut Graf? Yes, I have a cousin by that name.

Ask him about it?

Hello? Hello?

* * *

'May I help you, officers?'

The two police officers walked slowly around the man's house.

He followed. 'Hello? Is something wrong?'

'You are half-brother to Helmut Graf?'

'Yes. He was here a few days ago. Is he alright?'

The officers stopped. 'You are concerned for his safety?'

'Has something happened?'

'Yes, your half-brother made a serious mistake. He tried to kill some people, some people who you should never upset, let alone try and kill.'

The man shocked upright, mortified. 'These people, they are from Zug?'

An officer nodded then drew his pistol.

'Oh, God.'

'*He* cannot help you.'

* * *

'Police, there is a cow in my house.

What? No, it is not my cow.

No, I did not steal the cow!

No, there are many cows in my house. They are dead!

No, I did not kill them!

No, I don't mean I have steak!

I come home and my house, it has many dead cows in it, very large cows, all dead.

No, I am not having a barbecue.

I know the weather is nice.

Look, you idiot, someone has put a dozen dead cows into my house.

What? What do you mean *you* did it?

Helmut Graf, yes, he is a friend.

A good friend, why? What is this?

He is wanted? By the people in Zug?

Oh.

No, I don't mind about the cows.

Yes, I will clear it up.

Yes, I am sure, sorry to bother you.

Yes, thank you for your time.'

* * *

'Police, a lorry has crashed into my house!

A lorry! It has gone straight through my house.

Who am I? Franz Graf. I live above the village of Bardenz.

Where? A kilometre above the old mine.
I know there are no roads up here.
Yes, there are no roads big enough for a lorry.
No, I am not drunk.
How did a lorry travel up a hill with no roads?
Why are you asking me, how would I know?
I know it sounds stupid!
But this lorry has destroyed my house.
No, there is no sign of the driver.
Skid marks! My house is surrounded by meadows.
Marks in the grass? No, no marks.
How can a lorry leave no marks? I don't know!
What? No, I don't think it's a flying lorry?
What? *You* think it's a flying lorry? Are you drunk?
You did what? You dropped it by helicopter?
Are you mad?
Helmut Graf? Yes, my cousin.
Ask him?

2

‘Herr Otto, sir, Graf is in the Hotel Accordia, Munchen, false identity.

Lots of people, very public.
Yes, we have people in the room next door.
He is sitting in the restaurant.
Yes, our police friends are on the way.
Helicopter is a ten-minute drive away.
Wait ... Ricky is walking into the hotel.
No, not part of the plan.’

Ricky walked briskly through the lobby, his jaded appearance and shabby clothes causing a few comments. The manager sent a concierge after him as he entered the restaurant. There sat Helmut Graf, alone, booked into the hotel under an assumed name.

Ricky was tense, every muscle aching, his fists opening and closing. He reached the table and loomed over his target. Graf lifted his head, suddenly terrified. Ricky had that effect, even on the innocent.

‘Graf!’ Ricky shouted. Then, in a good German accent, ‘Helmut Graf!’ Other diners were shocked and glancing around. ‘You were told to stay away from my daughter!’

Now the diners’ attention was mixed, some staring at Ricky, some at Graf.

‘She is fifteen!’ Ricky barked, loud enough for people in the street to hear.

Now all the diners were focused on Graf, who appeared terrified enough to have been guilty of something.

‘You raped my fifteen year old daughter!’

If Ricky had needed it, some of the men sitting nearby were actually considering helping him.

‘Sir?’ the concierge asked. ‘Please, sir.’

Ricky reached down and grabbed Graf by the jacket as he tried to get away. The tall glass was right there, a split-second decision. With all his strength, his bodyweight shifted and Graf half standing, Ricky plunged Graf’s face down into the glass. Screams echoed around the restaurant, people started running. Ricky pulled Graf back up to the seated position, his face covered in blood, a large piece of glass sticking out from the bridge of his nose.

‘Police officers!’ two men shouted, grabbing Ricky. They had him in an arm lock in a second and were leading him quickly out.

‘K2,’ one whispered.

Ricky struggled as a man in his position might.

‘Police!’ the two men shouted at the manager as they passed reception. Outside the hotel they led him straight to a car, bundling him into the back. It sped off.

‘You crazy bastard!’ a K2 guard shouted. ‘There are cameras in there.’

‘Improvisation. We need to move quickly,’ Ricky barked. ‘There will be an ambulance in five minutes. Intercept it!’

The front seat passenger grabbed his phone.

As Graf sat there in shock, dabbing his face with a tissue, a grandmother walked briskly across and threw a boiling hot cup of coffee in his face. His screams could be heard in the street.

* * *

The chairman of The Lodge called the ‘special’ meeting to order. ‘We have a complete picture now of who tried to kill Beesely. I think that the inheritance was somewhat dubious.’

‘Of course it was, it’s Beesely! How else would he end up in that position? I wouldn’t be surprised if he hadn’t been planning this for forty years.’

The chairman nodded, others approving of the notion and rapping their knuckles on the table.

‘Seems like the bomb was aimed at this young man, Otto, who was probably in on it; helping Beesely get into power. Seems like the former head of K2 offered money to various political groups who never received the funds after his death. Amateur Nazi group, amateur bomb with old Serbian nerve agent. And Beesely is mopping up.’

‘Should we give him a hand?’ Henry risked.

The chairman cut the end off a cigar. ‘If he needed it, he would ask. He’s still playing the role, so let him. We’ll make contact when this settles down.’

‘Any news on ‘the bank society’?’ a man asked.

‘Not yet. But I am sure that he’ll have to tread very carefully, even a sniff in that direction could be fatal. That’s why I think he did all the eccentric stuff, had to look more like *him* and less like *us*. He had to, *has* to, look like someone who has inherited the money ... and do what

someone *like that* might do. The last thing he can afford to do is behave like himself.'

'What do we hope to achieve, exactly, from gaining access to this bank society?' a man asked, earning a few glances for his lack of insight.

Oliver hid a smile. 'Many of the world's governments make use of Swiss clearing houses, a lot of it known to only a few senior figures. North Korea, Iran, Syria, Russia, you name it. The IRA had accounts, Red Brigade, ETA. Even Bin Laden has accounts. Whoever has their eye on those accounts and movements has an eye on the world. Could end organized crime overnight. Accessing that group could be the single most significant event of the past sixty years.'

3

'We have Helmut Graf,' Otto flatly stated, no joy in his words.

Johno stood and stretched his back, Beesely sat staring into a mug of coffee.

Otto continued, 'Thanks in part to Ricky.' He recounted the story of what Ricky had done.

'Improvisation,' Johno pointed out, wagging a finger. 'On the spot decision making, that's what your boys could do with more of.'

Otto did not look as if he agreed.

Beesely waved him to a chair. 'Leave Ricky to me. Now, where is Graf?'

'We intercepted the ambulance, drove him to the airfield. Helicopter will be here in twenty minutes.'

'Good. I think we have some ... *comfortable* accommodation for him.'

* * *

Ricky walked into a small car-hire shop with two agents. He had not slept much in three days, his appearance even worse than normal, enough to frighten small children in the street. Behind the counter the top of a bald head was just visible.

‘Guten Tag?’ Ricky asked in German.

A very short man peered over the counter. ‘Tourist, not local,’ the top half of a face stated in an oddly slow and heavy Germanic accent. ‘I speak many languages, including perfect English.’

‘Might be easier if you stood then, instead of talking to the fucking desk,’ Ricky snarled.

‘I am standing.’

Ricky peered over the counter. ‘Oh, right. Sorry.’

‘Don’t be, I’m not. Now, what can I help you three large gentlemen with?’

Ricky thrust a photo of Rudenson over the counter and to within an inch of the man’s face. ‘Have you given a hire car to this man?’

‘I may be short, but I am not blind,’ the little man pointed out, studying Ricky through very thick glasses. He took the photo. ‘Yes, this morning. He was nervous and in a hurry.’ He handed the photo back. ‘I can see why now. Are his library books overdue?’

Ricky was about to say something, but just stared down at the man, wide eyed. ‘The vehicle and registration, if you please!’

‘Which are you going to offer, money or threats?’

Ricky pulled out his pistol and placed it to within an inch of the man’s forehead. ‘Which will get me to my next sugar fix the quickest?’

‘The money. Death does not frighten me.’

Ricky withdrew the pistol, slapping a wad of Euros on the counter. ‘Plenty more where that came from.’

The attendant took the money, handing up a sheet of paper almost immediately.

Ricky turned and read it. 'Rudenson's hire car - Passat, KB PC 537, green,' he shouted. A guard called in the information.

'He's Swiss, Zurich by the sound of him, you're English, and the man hiring the car was German, Bavarian I am sure. Since you are both armed, and wealthy, I would surmise that you are from Zug?'

Ricky turned back, offering a cold stare. 'If you know who we are, then you'd know the danger that you are in right now.'

'I know that you do not kill people for nothing, that you are normally far more stealthy. To be this open you must be in a very big hurry.'

Ricky considered killing the little man. 'Don't make me come back here.' He turned to leave.

'Wait!' the man called. 'I have more.'

'More what?'

'Information. When he first came in he did not see me, he made a call and went over to the cars, then came back.'

'Don't know how he missed you,' Ricky muttered. Then louder, 'And how much did you hear?'

'All of it. He is heading towards the Czech Republic, he spoke to a Serbian man about a passport, it sounded something similar to 'Yani'. Going to meet him. Not an easy language, Serbo-Croat.'

'You understood him?'

'Oh, yes. Meeting in a bar at 3pm in the town of Protovin. I did not get the bar's name, but the other man was coming by train, so probably close to the train station. I believe it is on a main line south. Herr Rudenson, not his real name I guess, will be driving through the Bohemian Forest in a few hours, a quiet and lonely road either side of the border.'

Ricky just stared, wide eyed.

The little man continued, 'There is a gasoline station ten kilometres before the border, always busy because

there are not many on that road. He has enough gasoline to get there, but he will need to fill up at that station.'

Ricky turned to the first guard. 'Get that? Call it in. I want everyone available on that border, in that town and get that petrol station staked out!'

'Glad to be of service,' came a sarcastic voice, the midget now pocketing the money.

Ricky leant over and handed the man a Bank business card. 'Call me, Ricky, on that number if you think of anything else. And if you want a frigging job.'

'My name is Herr Mole.'

'Mole? Great, Johno will love you.'

4

The road leading up to the castle was now lined with staff, three or four deep in places. All stood silent, staring at the prisoner and his escorts. Graf, terrified and covered in blood, and with makeshift bandages on his head, glanced at the faces.

Silence. They just stared back at him.

Two agents led the handcuffed and gagged prisoner slowly up the road, deliberately slowly; it took nine minutes.

At the castle, six spacemen stood waiting, along with Otto, Johno and Beesely. As Beesely stood waiting, observing the staff turnout, he could not help thinking why the staff were here for this, such a dramatic show. He could not help thinking that Otto was making a statement, and that the staff were the ones meant to be getting the warning.

Beesely stepped forwards and took a moment to study Graf. Finally, he stated, in soft tones and with no hint of emotion, 'We've prepared a room for you.' He turned his head up and around to the windows of the restaurant.

Graf struggled, squealing through the gag.

Beesely added, 'Not up to our usual high standards, I'm afraid, it's being renovated as we speak. Suffered a bomb attack. Got rid of most of the nerve agent, just a few damp areas remaining.' He nodded to the spacemen, who now took over, dragging Graf up the stairs, through decon' one, now with the water switched off, and into the gutted restaurant.

The prisoner was placed in a chair, a rope loosely thrown around him as he screamed. A gloved finger rubbed around the inside of the bomb's aerosol can then onto Graf's lips.

At first he just sat wondering if it was a trick; nothing happened for a few seconds. Then he twitched. His head began to jerk involuntarily, his lips starting to swell and burst with pus and blood. He screamed through the gag as his eyes started to bulge, blood oozing out of the corners, his body twitching violently, bones breaking against the restraints. The spacemen turned and left.

* * *

As Ricky sped along the Bohemian Highway he noticed and recognised several other agents in cars, waving as they passed, or as Ricky passed them. He dialled. 'This is Ricky. Get someone to the German side of the border, half way between the petrol station and the border, crash a car and set fire to it. I want that road east blocked and the police busy.'

A helicopter flew low overhead, in the direction they were headed.

'Is that one of ours?' Ricky asked.

The hour dragged on. Then Ricky's phone rang. 'There's a who? A Mole? You mean a spy? Oh, the car-hire man, *Herr Mole*. Yes, put him through.'

‘Herr Ricky? Is it convenient?’ came the slow, heavily accented voice.

‘Yes, thought of something else?’

‘I have been going over the Serbo-Croat in my mind. One word could mean passport or identity paper, another aeroplane.’

‘Shit! No, not you. Thanks, you’ll be rewarded. Anything else, let me know.’ Ricky hung up then re-dialled. ‘Alert everyone, Rudenson is trying to get a fake passport, should be heading to an airport some time after 3pm. Find all airports close to this place Protovin or a few hours’ drive.’

The guard in the rear tapped Ricky’s shoulder. ‘Prague airport is perhaps forty minutes from Protovin.’

‘Shit!’

‘Vienna airport one and half hours –’

‘Shit! We’ve got to close that box!’

His phone rang again. ‘Yes!’ He listened. ‘OK.’

Ricky turned his head to address both the driver and rear passenger. ‘Serbian Intelligence are on board, Rudenson was due to fly there from Vienna tonight. They cancelled his ticket and visa, he’s now on their wanted list.’

Twenty minutes later, as they neared the Bohemian Forest, Ricky’s phone warbled, ascending in volume. He answered and listened briefly.

‘We intercepted a call to his mobile, this Yani tosser. He cried off his meeting, scared shitless, knows everyone is after Rudenson. And now so does Rudenson, his phone was switched off.’ He stared out of the window. ‘Fuck! If he’s clever he’ll go to ground.’

Ten minutes later Rudenson’s hire car was reported burning on a side road, no sign of a driver. A Volkswagen camper van moved north, driven by a woman and with two young children in the rear. She drove steadily, sobbing, the

man crouching in the back holding a gun to her child's head.

And vengeance shall be mine

1

‘Herr Shultz, say hello to Herr Wagen.’

Two K2 agents waved the arms of two drugged men now sitting slumped and facing each other in the home of Herr Wagen. They placed pistols into the hands of the two drugged and unconscious gang leaders.

‘Oh, please, Mr. Shultz, don’t shoot me!’ an agent joked. A shot through the stomach elicited groans.

‘Oh, dear, I think he felt that. Sedative must be wearing off,’ the second agent noted.

‘Hey, you shot my dummy!’ the first agent protested, now shooting Wagen.

‘So, you want a fight, eh?’

Another shot, through the stomach, caused more groaning.

‘Hey! No shooting below the belt.’ He put a shot through Shultz’s knee.

‘Bastard! How is my man supposed to play football now?’ He shot back, through the arm.

‘Hey, he used to play the piano! How’s he going to play now?’ He shot an ear off.

The second man let his ‘dummy’ fall. ‘How are the police going to explain this? I think we have to make it appear as if one was trying to run away. Hold up your guy and turn him around.’

Wagen got shot in the backside and the kidneys, before being dropped onto a glass coffee table, smashing it.

‘Oops.’

‘My guy is still alive, time to call the ambulance.’

With a gloved finger the agent dialled, leaving the phone off the hook.

‘Ambulance. Hello? Hello?’ came from the phone as the agents left.

* * *

Otto lowered his phone. ‘The two main German gangs are making threats to each other. Wagen is dead, Shultz critical. Each side blames the other.’

Johno nodded. ‘Step two.’

* * *

‘Hello, my friend,’ came through the dark.

‘Who are you?’ the German skinhead asked, suddenly aware of a man blocking his path.

‘Nice tattoos. Did they hurt?’

‘I’ll hurt you –’

A shot through the stomach changed his mind.

‘Who am I? I’m the man holding a gun that belongs to someone you know, with his prints all over it. You die, he goes to jail - it’s an imperfect universe.’

* * *

‘A book store should not have so much paper in it.’

‘Flammable, paper is!’

‘Really? Probably should not have set light to it then?’

‘Bit of a compulsion with you, I have noticed.’

‘Not really a compulsion, more of a hobby.’

‘You cannot call it a hobby, more of a *pastime*.’

Their faces were brightly illuminated by the explosion, the front windows blowing out.

‘What did it say on the fascia?’

‘Books and replicas.’

‘Strange. Next one on the list is *Publications* and replicas.’

‘Come, it’s an hour’s drive. Six more before dawn.’

* * *

‘No self respecting skinhead should be hung from an autobahn bridge with his trousers down.’

‘What is that thing some people do with the choking of the neck, in sex?’

‘Ah, auto-eroticism.’

‘Well, that is what he was doing, no?’

‘He was a skinhead weighing a hundred kilos, jumping off a twenty-metre bridge with a ten-metre rope with his pants down. I think the police will not suspect auto-eroticism.’

A loud horn had been followed by loud thud, then the body landed back on the bridge. They stood and stared at it. They stared at each other. They stared at the body again and the truck slowing down.

‘I am not telling the boss about this.’

They both shook their heads, quickly tipping the body back over the side.

2

‘Going to plan,’ Johno stated as he entered Beesely’s office.

‘What about Bavaria?’ Beesely asked as Otto joined them.

‘Like the frigging end of World War II,’ Johno reported. ‘German TV is jumping up and down like crazy. So far it’s one Nazi gang fighting another. But even their Chancellor is questioning how thirty-six book stores went up in flames on the same night with no witnesses or suspects.’

‘Austria?’

‘Twenty odd bookstores,’ Johno reported.

‘England?’

‘Handful. Lot of stuff is bought over the Internet,’ Johnno explained.

‘Good point.’ Beesely faced Otto. ‘Ask the technology guys to start attacking right-wing web sites. After all, we wish to be *thorough* ... in our attack on these people.’

With Otto out of the room Beesely eased back into his chair, swivelling to face Johnno. ‘Noticed anything ... *odd*, about Otto’s behaviour over all this?’

Johnno consider the question. He shrugged. ‘Keen to get back at them – definitely takes it all personally. *He’s* taken it worse than you!’

Beesely lifted his eyebrows for emphasis and nodded.

‘So what you getting at?’

‘Otto, has been very keen to ... send a message, *to whom it may concern*. A very clear message – mess with K2 and we track down your ancestors!’

‘They are Swiss, thorough little buggers!’

‘This is all ... way beyond thorough. Getting back at Rudenson and those responsible is one thing, attacking those who share the same ... loose political allegiances is another matter.’

‘So K2 made a statement,’ Johnno considered. ‘So did Gunter with *the chair*.’

‘Yes, but to whom? And why? My lust for vengeance, what it was, ended with Rudenson. That is, of course, assuming that no one else was pulling Rudenson’s strings.’

Johnno cocked a teasing eyebrow. ‘Upset anyone ... over the past fifty, sixty years?’

‘A couple,’ Beesely conceded.

‘And with you landing on your feet here, all this money...’

‘May well have caused some concern in distant parts. Unfortunately, it’s a long list.’

Johnno expression suggested that that was the understatement of the century.

‘Let’s work on the assumption that –’

‘You’ve fucked off a few people. Governments, husbands, intelligence agencies...’

‘You overlook one fact,’ Beesely toyed.

Johno rested a cigarette on his lip without lighting it. ‘The timer.’

Beesely nodded. ‘Could have been anything from a week ... to six weeks. If it was beyond a week or two -’

‘Then mister shiny shoes and straight tie was the target,’ Johno finished off.

‘You see *the person* ... as the target. I think maybe –’

‘The organisation was the target,’ Johno finished off. ‘Someone Gunter fucked off, wanting to take it out in one go by cutting off the head.’

‘There are more effective ways of doing that,’ Beesely suggested. ‘Nerve gas is ... extraordinary.’

‘Would have made the papers.’

‘And made our new home uninhabitable ... in normal circumstances,’ Beesely pointed out. ‘Without the American and Israeli decon’ teams it would be just that.’

‘Lot of *whatifs* in there,’ Johno pointed out.

‘I take some solace in the fact that my being here, and my ... connection with those who could decontaminate this place, has created a double negative.’

‘Come again?’ Johno curtly asked.

‘If that bomb had gone off without us here the castle would be uninhabitable. If my arrival here caused the bomb, it also caused the solution to it - hence the double negative. Bit like inviting a fireman to your house when the neighbours are planning arson.’

Johno stood, shaking his head. ‘I’ll leave the thinking to you.’

* * *

Dame Helen walked into operational control at MI6 headquarters, glancing at the array of TV screens showing CNN, Sky and Al-Jazeera.

‘OK. What’s new in Estonia?’ Dame Helen asked.

‘Ma’am, any clues about Germany?’

‘Germany?’ Dame Helen puzzled.

‘Thirty dead, hundred injured. Seems that gang war has broken out between rival skinheads and neo-Nazis.’

‘When did all this happen?’

‘Started last night. Here’s the weird part - thirty odd Nazi book stores torched within four hours of each other, spread right across Europe.’

Dame Helen stared ahead. ‘That would take quite some ... organizing.’

‘No arrests, no suspects.’

Dame Helen turned, thinking hard and nodding. ‘Keep me up to date.’

3

Beesely sat facing four of the senior male members of his management team, their assignments in front of him. As were Otto’s and Johno’s, the two of them sitting to one side of his desk.

‘OK, gentlemen. The assignment was to consider what to do to Rudenson when we catch him.’ Beesely glanced at Otto. ‘A clear ... *message*, for anyone screwing with us in the future.’ He held the first suggestion. ‘Marcus, you are a sick and twisted individual.’

‘But, sir!’ Marcus began to protest.

Beesely cut him off with a wave of his hand. ‘It’s OK. We asked for suggestions and yours is suitably ... sick and twisted. These other two are just improvements on *getting the chair*,’ Beesely stated, handing them back. ‘But thank you for your efforts.’

‘Johno, yours I put down after the first paragraph.’

‘Why?’ Johno complained. ‘Good idea.’

Beesely scowled at him. ‘And impractical.’ He held the next page. ‘Steffan, this is good, it was considered.’ Beesely showed it to Johno.

Johno nodded as he read it. ‘Good ... I like this. Not too much pain, all psychological. But waking up three months later as a woman – that’d screw with your head.’

Beesely held the last piece of paper. ‘It was an idea that Otto gave me that I have expanded upon and come up with this. I hope, and trust, it meets with the *standards*... expected from K2.’ He distributed copies and they all took a minute to digest it.

‘Works for me,’ Johno enthused.

‘It is good,’ Otto agreed. ‘And we must let people know what happened to this man.’

The senior managers approved.

‘So, gentlemen, are we agreed?’ Beesely asked. They were. ‘We shall call this *Endgame*.’

The Israeli school of diplomacy

1

The next morning Beesely was sat working at his desk when Otto appeared in the doorway, looking hesitant. He peered over the rims of his glasses.

‘The German Government have sent a delegation to us. They have just arrived and insist on seeing you.’ Otto waited for a response, stood in the doorway.

Beesely slowly sipped his lemon tea. ‘Guess we had better make sure we have enough milk in then,’ he muttered without looking up. Now louder, ‘Dig me out the relevant files beforehand.’

He looked up as Otto turned to leave. ‘Oh, Otto? Drive them past the castle, have plenty of spacemen visible and armed guards, then bring them through the back way.’

Otto seemed uncertain. ‘Do you ... have a plan?’

Beesely sipped his tea. ‘Yes. Make it up as I go along, as usual.’ He forced a quick smile.

Otto welcomed the delegation into Beesely’s office, polite and professional, a warm welcome for Minister Blaum. Beesely sat looking fatigued, but resolute.

Chairs had been laid out around the front of the desk, but further away than might be normal for such meetings. The German delegation consisted of their Ambassador to Switzerland, Deputy Foreign Minister and Interior Minister. Beesely had already decided who wore the long pants in this group; the Interior Minister, an imposing looking six-foot man, weighing twenty stone at the least. No briefcases or files were evident, so this meeting was ‘off the radar’. Beesely waited as Otto sat and settled himself.

Minister Blaum was clearly uneasy. ‘Herr Beesely, may I introduce the Deutsche Interior Minister, Herr Wilhelm.’

Beesely lifted his head a degree. 'Is there something I can help you gentlemen with?'

Wilhelm paused. 'I must say I was surprised to find an... *Englishman* here, and not Herr Gunter.' Beesely did not respond. Wilhelm glanced at Blaum. 'Minister Blaum has spoken highly of you, and your diplomatic skills, which seem to be sadly lacking today.'

Beesely eased forwards, resting his arms on the desk. 'I have just finished incinerating the body of my daughter ... and six of my kitchen staff. You'll forgive me if I don't get up and dance on the table.'

Wilhelm was visibly shocked. He glanced at Blaum, suddenly concerned. 'Herr Beesely, we are ... sorry for your loss. I did not know –'

'There are many things that you don't know. Such as... that it was a German national who planted the nerve agent that killed my staff –'

'Nerve agent!' Wilhelm exploded. 'Here? That's what those men in suits were for?'

'Yes, they are decontaminating our facility,' Beesely quietly explained.

'Is there any danger?' Wilhelm demanded.

'To you, yes, but not from the nerve agent,' Beesely softly stated.

'I must remind you, Herr Beesely, that I am a senior Minister in the German Government –'

'For the moment,' Beesely responded, just above a whisper.

Wilhelm stumbled. 'What?'

Beesely took a file from his drawer and rested a hand on it. 'If the contents of this file were accidentally leaked to the press you would no longer be a Minister, nor would many of your colleagues.'

Wilhelm was stunned, now reddening around the face and neck. He glanced at Blaum again, demanding, 'What is the meaning of this ... this threat?'

Beesely took a moment. ‘A German national, sent by another German national – who just so happens to have close links to several political groups and currently serving members of your coalition government - planted a bomb in this facility, in a low security area, our staff canteen. It was laced with Serbian nerve agent, stored on German soil for more than ten years. I can’t help feeling that, if your security services were not so damned inefficient, that the gas may have been found and my daughter would still be alive.’

‘You blame *us* for this?’ Wilhelm barked.

‘You were warned many times by various intelligence agencies, including the Israelis at the beginning of this year after they tracked the packages sent to their Ambassadors, also laced with nerve agent, back to Germany.’

‘Any such claim would have been investigated thoroughly by the police -’

Beesely banged his fist on the file, cutting the Minister off. He fixed the large man with a steely stare. ‘My people yesterday found and neutralised a litre container of this nerve agent, stored in the basement of a house in a residential area of central Munich. If that gas had been released in an indoor sports arena it could have killed thirty thousand people!’

The Germans shifted uneasily in their seats, glancing at each other. Wilhelm had to mop his brow.

Beesely tapped the file. ‘Would you like me to release the evidence to the German press and TV? Would you care to bet just how long you would remain in a job?’

Without any prompting Otto poured out glasses of water and offered them to the visitors.

Wilhelm composed himself and slipped back into character as a Minister. ‘This nerve gas should have been reported to our authorities. The street should have been evacuated –’

‘And the press notified. Do you really want to tell the people of Munich that they have been sleeping with that stuff for ten years, the German police *ignorant* about its location?’

‘No, gentlemen, I don’t think you do. You see, over the next few days and weeks my people will find the gas - regardless of who they have to torture - and dispose of it quietly without anyone ever having known about it. And at the end of it all ... it will look like rival neo-Nazi gangs fighting each other.’

‘That would seem a reasonable approach,’ Blaum tentatively suggested to his German colleagues, ‘considering the alternative.’

Beesely squinted at Blaum, surprised by the help he was getting.

‘The alternative,’ Beesely began, tapping the file, ‘is full disclosure to the press of everything; the deaths of Swiss citizens at the hands of German neo-Nazis, formal complaints by the Swiss against the Germans, legal action from us against the German Government and police, panic on the streets in Germany as people fear public places ... and the release of this document.’ Beesely opened the file and held up a page for their inspection. ‘The detailed plans of attack for releasing the nerve agent inside your parliament, your Bundestag.’

Wilhelm looked as if he was about to keel over. ‘We were the target? The Government?’

Beesely handed it over. ‘No need to thank me for saving your lives.’ He turned to Otto. ‘Tea please, and something to eat.’

Beesely settled the visitors and eased them back from the edge of despair.

‘Gentlemen, I hope that everyone is refreshed and back to normal?’ They sipped their drinks. ‘You came here, no doubt, because you probably heard rumours that we were

behind the attacks on neo-Nazi bookshops. We were. Tough shit.'

Wilhelm and his Ministers blinked.

Beesely continued, 'That phase of the operation is just about over, but the trail of those responsible for killing my staff is still hot. They may be in Germany, or elsewhere by now. We shall pursue them to the ends of the earth, and God help anyone who gets in our way.

'There are, I believe, one or two canisters left in Germany, which we will find and discreetly dispose of. There are also remnants in Bosnia, maybe some in Serbia itself no doubt. They will be dealt with!

'After that, gentlemen, we shall try as best we can to repair any damage that may have been done to relations between ourselves and the German Government - something which is very important to the Swiss Government, and to the people within this organization. Since I am its head, something that is also important to me.

'If you take the time to analyse the situation, you will conclude that no other course of action was available to us. The other paths that we could have taken would have been costly to us, our business and our reputation, to the Swiss Government and to your government - had you survived to think about it. At best the newspapers would have crucified us all; no one would have been a winner, all of us would have lost greatly. We will, gentlemen, sink or swim together on this, because we are too closely linked to do anything else.

'We will try not to exaggerate the situation in your country, but we need the cover story, and we need to take power and organization away from the neo-Nazi groups, because only with organization and money can they afford to buy stolen Serbian nerve agent. If we keep them weak then we need not fear an organized response. I apologise for walking all over your sovereignty, gentlemen, but necessity dictated that I do so, for the benefit of us all.'

Wilhelm nodded for several seconds. ‘Minister Blaum was correct about you, and your abilities, not least as a diplomat.’ He stood. ‘Now we must return and exercise some very serious damage limitation and try and hold onto our jobs.’

Beesely eased up. ‘We have people well placed in your media sector, the TV and newspapers. When we hear of them about to attack you we will warn you and use our influence to suppress such stories.’

Wilhelm brightened. ‘That is good to know.’

‘And a few weeks from now we shall reconvene and start again.’

2

‘Rudenson got onto a flight to Moscow three hours ago, Serbian passport,’ Otto dispassionately stated.

Beesely massaged his head as he sat on his hotel room bed. ‘Where did he fly from?’ he asked without looking up. ‘Warsaw.’

Now Beesely raised his head. ‘Warsaw? Long drive!’

Johno knocked and entered. ‘What’s up?’

Beesely slowly stood. ‘Our *friend* is in Moscow.’

‘Moscow? Shit, do we have people in Moscow?’

‘Not many,’ Otto replied.

‘We heading there?’ Johno asked.

‘It is not safe,’ Otto suggested. ‘For you, Sir Morris.’

‘Please don’t call me “sir”.’ He patted Otto on the arm. ‘Morris or Beesely will do just fine. Or even Herr Director, getting used to that now.’

Otto gave a professional Swiss head tip.

‘Listen,’ Johno began, his hands in pockets. ‘The one thing I do know about Moscow is that if you’ve got money you can buy anything. For the sort of money we have you could buy the whole damn city.’

‘He’s right,’ Beesely agreed as he walked to the window. ‘Ask our people in Moscow to take some money around to the... most notorious gangster they can find, and put a price on finding Rudenson and delivering him *alive*.’

Otto made a call.

Johno joined Beesely at the window. Looking down they could see tourists coming and going from the Spa Hotel. ‘Moscow has plenty of underpaid doctors and surgeons.’

Beesely half turned, nodding as he thought. ‘Yes, that’s true. When they have him we’ll move to *endgame*.’

Endgame

1

Yuri, the overweight guard, stood trying to shelter from the Moscow rain as he kept watch. The large doorway of this old apartment block afforded plenty of protection from the Moscow rain, but he was not allowed to stand too far inside; from there he could not see the street.

A taxi pulled up, the vehicle unlike most of the dated vehicles that took short cuts through this street. This was a Mercedes taxi, not common, and for rich Moscovites or tourists only. A man in a smart suit clambered out carrying a large silver case, Yuri checking the rest of the street quickly. The taxi made off at speed the man approaching, smiling confidently.

‘Evening, Yuri,’ the man offered in good Russian, but obviously not a local.

Yuri was puzzled. He did not wish to upset a friend or customer of his boss, but this could also be a trap. ‘Hello. Do I know you, sir?’

‘No, you don’t. But I wish to see your boss, Vladimir.’

‘Is he expecting you?’

The stranger’s features turned to stone. ‘No one ever expects me when I call.’

Even more puzzling. ‘Uh?’

‘May I see your boss, please? Now!’

‘Who are you, please?’

The visitor held up the case and displayed the contents. ‘I am the man with a million dollars for him.’

Yuri could not believe his eyes. Many thoughts ran through his head; screw the boss, shoot him and take the money. It’s a trick. It’s a bomb under the money. ‘Wait here,’ he finally suggested, dialling his boss on his mobile. ‘Yuri here, Boss ... I’m downstairs where I’m supposed to

be ... yes, there is a man here to see you ... don't know ... he has a million dollars in a case. Yes ... no, he is alone. Yes, I've seen it ... in a case.' He faced the stranger. 'Wait here, please.'

A moment later two gunmen came out. 'We want to see the money,' the first gunman demanded.

'I want to see your boss. I'll give him two minutes before I'm leaving.'

They glanced at each other. 'OK, inside,' the same man ordered, now with his hand inside his jacket. The gunmen shooed away some inquisitive prostitutes and showed the man in the suit into an old lift, never taking their eyes off him.

Vladimir had been eating, but now sat on a sofa as his food cooled, a liberal amount of his half-finished meal down the front of his bulging shirt, some in his moustache. Four more gunmen stood around the room, two skinny prostitutes peeking out from a side room.

'Hello,' he said, lost for other useful words.

The case was placed down and opened. 'This is for you. One million dollars, American.'

Vladimir shuffled along the sofa, his large stomach an impediment to that chosen method of movement, then examined a wad of dollars. He threw the wad to a guard. 'Check it.'

'My employers only deal in *real* money,' the visitor suggested.

'And who are your employers?' Vladimir asked.

'A Swiss intelligence agency called ... K2.'

The gunmen took a step back.

It was hard to maintain your dignity and authority as you slid off a couch, stumbled and then stood as if attacked by a swarm of bees. 'You let K2 into my apartment!' Vladimir barked. His men drew their weapons. 'No, no,' Vladimir shouted, holding out his hands. 'No shooting in here!'

The man in the suit had just the faintest hint of a smile creasing a cheek. 'I have not come here to harm you.'

Vladimir composed himself. 'Why have you come here?'

'My employer wishes that you do a job for him.'

Vladimir took a breath and composed himself. 'Yes, of course.' He wiped food off his shirt. 'You ... you want someone killed?'

'No, we want someone found.'

'I see. And this money is for finding this person.'

'No, this money is for your expenses in finding this person. When you have found him there will be another nineteen million dollars for you.'

'Twenty million! Your employer wants this somebody very badly, no?'

'My employer wishes to point out that ... if you don't find this person ... he will be *disappointed* with you.'

Vladimir took a sharp step back before composing himself. 'Yes, I know what happens when your boss is ... *disappointed* with people.'

'Good. To business.' The K2 agent produced a piece of paper and a photo. 'Here are all the details you will need. It's a German that we are looking for, he arrived by plane last night. He will not be staying in a hotel, he is not that foolish, he will be trying hard not to be found. His one connection here is a nationalist campaigner. Our German friend is a fundraiser for nationalist groups.'

'Ah, yes, I know these idiots and where they drink. They have a club, small time hoodlums.'

'That would be a good place to start. We expect him found by tomorrow night.'

'Tomorrow!'

'If you want the rest of the money, and to keep my boss happy, then we would like him tomorrow night - *alive and well*. My number is on the card, call me anytime, day or night.'

Vladimir was moving with a purpose. A hundred thousand dollars had been offered to anyone who had information, and that reward offer had been passed by word of mouth a thousand times inside an hour. Every thug in Moscow wanted to find the 'German Nazi'. The police had been tipped off, many officers refusing to go home at the end of their shift, many squad cars doubled up from two to four officers as they all hunted earnestly for Rudenson.

That evening became one of the safest on record in Moscow for a damp summer's night, crime fell to almost zero; every police officer was out on the streets, every thug gainfully employed searching.

2

It turned 6am and Beesely could not sleep. He tried a light breakfast and some tea before heading down to the hotel's sauna. As he sat down onto the wooden slatted seats, leaving guards in the corridor, a fit and tanned man entered from the changing rooms.

Beesely noted the man's physique and his scars. 'You look like you've been through the wars.'

'Several!' Mr. Grey sat. 'The chairman of the Lodge sends his regards, and his condolences for your loss, sir.'

Beesely took a while answering, staring at the floor. 'That's very kind of them. Thank them for the helicopters. Who's chairman at the moment?'

'Oliver Stanton, sir.'

Beesely smiled. 'Olly still going strong, eh? Tell him I will be in the Bahamas next week some time to meet up. Now be a good man, and scoot.'

Mr. Grey stood, faced Beesely and added. 'The group wishes to confer its complete support, sir.'

Beesely made no comment. Mr. Grey waited a second before turning and stepping out, Beesely holding his gaze on the door that Mr. Grey had just walked through.

3

At 8am Beesely emerged from his hotel room in a black suit, finding Johnno adjusting his tie in the corridor. Johnno had also received a new black suit from Otto and had shaved, trimmed his moustache and had a haircut.

Then out popped a nervous young boy from behind Johnno. He seemed familiar, Beesely shooting a questioning look at Johnno.

‘The bellhop.’

‘Ah, yes,’ Beesely remembered, greeting the boy in German.

Johnno put a hand on the boy’s shoulder, giving the lad a reassuring hug. Beesely straightened, wide-eyed and questioning. ‘His mother worked in the kitchens,’ Johnno explained, making strong eye contact. Beesely’s shoulders dropped. ‘Kids got no relatives nearby, just some very old grandparents of his mum’s ex-partner, who she never frigging liked. He’s been living with a neighbour. Kid’s up for adoption, so I went and fetched him. Figured he could crash out at the castle.’

Beesely squinted. ‘You ... went and fetched him?’

Otto approached, flanked by two bodyguards in dark suits. He frowned a question to Beesely about the boy.

‘Boys, meet your new adopted son,’ Beesely pointedly, and firmly, announced.

‘My God,’ Otto whispered. ‘His mother, I had forgotten.’ He seemed stunned, especially at Beesely’s reproachful glare.

‘I want adoption papers drawn up.’ Beesely explained to the boy in German that he was now part of their family, which pleased the boy greatly. Twelve-year-old Thomas

explained, in broken English, that ‘secret agent’ Johnno would protect him.

Beesely inspected Johnno, Johnno inspected Beesely then they both checked Otto.

‘I guess we’re ready, gentlemen,’ Beesely stated.

Off they set. Beesely at the front, two bodyguards well ahead ready to open doors, Otto and Johnno side-by-side behind him and all in step with military precision. Johnno held Thomas by the shoulder, who now walked along watching Johnno’s feet, making large strides to stay in step.

The foyer became the first sign of things to come on this pleasant summer’s morning. All of the hotel staff had turned out; some in uniform with black armbands, some in black suits. Beesely shook the hand of the manager, thanking him for his staff’s respects before heading slowly out of the hotel. The hotel steps were lined with guards, the edges of the parking area three deep with people stood in silence. Quite who they were, Beesely did not know. He paused at the car door, slowly surveying the faces around the entire car park before he eased himself into the waiting vehicle.

With the car door closed he enquired in a concerned whisper, ‘Who are all these people?’

Otto half turned his head. ‘The Bank employs a lot of people, especially in Zug and Zurich. Some have travelled down, but most are local. They are showing their respects.’

‘So much for secrecy,’ Johnno commented, taking in the crowds.

The convoy moved slowly out to the main road, local motorbike police stopping traffic. Three Range Rovers joined the convoy, plus two motorcycle officers at the front, another two at the rear – all keenly observed by Beesely.

‘How many people will be here today?’ Beesely asked.

‘We believe three thousand,’ Otto informed him.

Beesely held his gaze on Otto for a moment, an eyebrow raised, before exchanging a look with Johnno.

The cemetery at Zug rested on a hillside with a clear view towards the castle. It circled the hill, following its contours like a giant apron. Exiting the Range Rover, Johnno stood taking in the scene.

To his immediate left was an old section with its strangely carved gravestones for the richer members of the town's medieval dead. Some bushes and trees next to a dilapidated old iron fence led to the middle section, which seemed to Johnno to consist of British style gravestones, then finally came a flat grassy area off to the right ready for new arrivals.

He turned fully around. The castle itself was not visible, but he could just make out the trees that he knew edged the castle lawn, and he could see the cliff. He was sure he could see the glint of the restaurant windows and pointed it out to Beesely as they ambled away from their line of vehicles and towards the waiting crowd. As they progressed, Johnno now noticed that Beesely seemed put out by the public spectacle.

Five graves had been prepared, all in a line, all with new headstones and freshly laid turf, the edges of the grass squares visible in places. The remaining two graves had been prepared in other towns. Despite the fact that there were no bodies, just headstones, the graves had been prepared in a traditional style, most bystanders unaware of the exact circumstances of the deaths.

Chairs had been laid out off to the right, ten yards from the line of fresh graves, and behind the chairs stood the families of the victims, almost fifty people. The closest family members sat behind a row of chairs left empty for Beesely and company. Beesely had attended a lot of funerals in his lifetime, but none for almost ten years. Now

Otto directed him towards the crowd, grouped just below the fresh graves, and twenty minutes of handshakes began.

The senior command-staff were present, Beesely thanking them all without shaking their hands. Then he was mildly surprised to find the Mossad team, now in black suits, which he considered Otto must have provided. He thanked them all and worked down the line. Next came the American decontamination team, similarly dressed and similarly thanked; they had delayed their return home to pay their respects.

Johno thanked the Major and the Captain, a handshake and a nod. Beesely was then surprised to find Minister Blaum and several of his associates. They offered their condolences. The Serbian Ambassador putting in an appearance came as quite a shock for Beesely, but he acknowledged it as a nice gesture. The ambassador offered his condolences, looking as if he knew more than was publicly known.

Beesely stopped dead, glances at Johno and Otto. Beyond Blaum stood the British, American and Israeli Ambassadors, Beesely not quite sure how much they knew, or who had invited them. Johno became concerned, wondering what was going through Beesely's mind, since his features had hardened as they progressed.

The British Ambassador handed over telegrams of condolence from the Home Secretary, Dame Helen, the Foreign Secretary and the Queen – leaving Beesely holding the telegrams in silence for many seconds – a quick, unhappy glance at Johno as he pocketed them.

The senior staff from the banking divisions were introduced, some of them meeting their employer for the first time, followed by the heads of various divisions that Beesely had only recently heard of. He shook hands with the ex-SAS contingent, now six strong, four fresh faces catching his attention. He glanced at Johno.

Johnno leant in and whispered, 'They're recent SAS boys, sharp team. It's our first hostage rescue team of Brits. Available for wet work.'

Beesely greeted the fit young men, none more than thirty years old in his estimation. Finally he turned to the waiting families. Earlier, Otto had explained that all of the victims' families had received a generous lump sum payout and had been offered a pension for life equal to the salary that their family member earned when they had been killed.

Meeting the families was not an easy task for Beesely, Otto shouldering much of the burden since he was known to most of them. Mothers and daughters greeted Otto as if he was their employer, fathers thanking him for his generosity, the Swiss maintaining an in-bred stoic facade. And the few children present today affected Otto more than Beesely.

Johnno separated from the group and read the gravestones, those he could understand. Finally there was Jane's, the words chosen by Beesely.

ALL THE MONEY IN THE WORLD,
THE MIGHTIEST ARMIES,
CANNOT ROLL BACK THE YEARS,
CANNOT STOP THE EBBING TIDE,
CANNOT DELAY OUR APPOINTMENT WITH DEATH.
THE SAND RUNS OUT OF THE HOUR GLASS,
IT KNOWS NO MALICE.

P.S. WHEN SHOOTING MOLES, WEAR CAMOUFLAGE!

Johnno smiled. 'See ya', sister. Thanks for all the cuppas.'

Ricky appeared at his shoulder, now squeezed into an ill-fitting suit and looking uncomfortable.

Johnno sighed and said, 'Late again.'

'Just dispatched the last of Rudenson's relatives.' Johnno nodded, still fixed on the grave. Ricky added, 'His uncle

lived on a lake, isolated enough. The neighbours said he loved the old lake, so now he's fucking resting in it, feeding the fish.'

'Where you living?' Johnno asked.

'Boarding house in the town. Cosy enough.'

'Otto never offered you a room in the castle?' Johnno teased.

Ricky forced a tired smile. 'I work for a living, that's for the fucking in-bred officer class.'

'Cheeky bastard. Anyway, I live in a dungeon. Pop down later for a beer and a chat.'

The priest, a company man apparently, performed the service in German, lasting around ten minutes. Otto then spoke at length, taking longer than the priest and making favourable personal comments about all the deceased without the aid of any notes.

Johnno spent the time taking in the many new faces, whilst Beesely simply sat and stared at the line of graves, deep in thought. When it came to Beesely's turn to speak he simply shook his head at Otto, his prepared speech still in his pocket. Otto stepped across and sat as family members said a few words in turn.

Ignoring the German-Swiss speeches, Beesely stared dispassionately at the ambassadors. 'You know ... it all comes down to politics,' he softly stated, Johnno and Otto half turning their heads towards him. 'Life and death, people, they're just commodities at the end of the day – pieces on a chess board.'

Otto frowned his lack of understanding, and his concern.

Beesely continued, 'Here we sit, an obscure Swiss bank, with the world's ambassador's paying homage. On any other day I might feel popular. Today I feel like pawn in a game.'

Otto grew concerned, a quick glance exchanged with Johnno.

Johnno took in the ambassadors. 'If you're a fucking pawn,' he whispered, 'that don't say much for me. I figured you were the king on this chessboard.'

'If I'm the king,' Beesely responded, still focused on the ambassadors, 'then I can move in any direction I like, but just one square at a time.'

Otto held his gaze on the side of Beesely's head for many seconds.

* * *

Later that evening Beesely took Otto and Johnno to one side.

'Now, gentlemen, we have a new addition to the family. Or should I say that *you* have a new addition. I will not live many more years, and when I'm gone young Thomas will be *your* responsibility.' He wagged a finger. 'The boy is in our care because his mother's blood is on our hands.'

Johnno looked as if he was about to say something, but got cut off by a pointed finger.

'Now listen well. I screwed up my attempts to be a father, I did not do a very good job. You, gentlemen, will have to do better than I managed, which should not be so difficult.' He pointed at Otto. 'You will not spoil him –'

'Spoil?' Otto queried.

'You will try and raise him just like a normal boy, if that is indeed possible given this dysfunctional family and what we do for a living. Understand? He will not be given too much, he will not be treated like a prince. Otto, I want his English to improve. Quickly! Then arrange a tutor for him, make sure he keeps up with his lessons.'

Beesely turned his head a few degrees. 'Johno! No beer, no porn, no girls, no swearing around the kid.'

Johno looked at his shoes.

'Besides that, I want you to teach him weapons handling -' Johno lifted his head. '- straight away. Survival, escape and evasion, it might keep the kid alive longer. Teach him how to shoot and how to kill, and how to spot the bad men. Teach him how to look over his shoulder and how to look under a car before he sits in it.

'Otto, teach him how to climb and how to ski. Teach him languages, and educate him about how the world really works. Consider this, gentlemen, your greatest challenge yet. And it won't just be the boy learning - it will be you two. Johno, you've never married or had any kids, not that we know about anyway. This will be good for you, women like single fathers with cute kids. It will give you an element of ... respectability.' He wagged an accusing finger. 'You will make an effort to spend time with him. Pick him up from sports and drop him off, don't just send a guard for him. You, Otto, will help him with his studies, not just rely on a tutor. You, Johno, will rise early when the boy needs it. And not hung over!'

He took a breath. 'It would be nice, gentlemen, if I could go to my grave knowing that *my* boys will do the kind of parenting that I never did.'

4

Six hours after Vladimir had put the word out, and ten hours after Rudenson had landed in Moscow, the elusive German lay tied up, being rushed across Moscow in the back of a police car, its siren wailing.

It would not have been a bad journey normally, certainly not one to cause injury, save for this being Moscow, and any fast and long car journey obviously

involved Moscow roads, not known for their smooth surfaces and good maintenance.

By time they arrived at Vladimir's dilapidated apartment block Rudenson had been sick onto the already bloodstained seat. With his arms tied behind his back, Vladimir's men dragged their prisoner unceremoniously by the elbows up the steps and into the lift, depositing him onto the lounge's hard marble floor, making the apartment's owner a very happy, and very rich, man.

* * *

'They have him,' Otto calmly reported.

Beesely glanced at John. 'Endgame.' Turning back to Otto he instructed, 'Arrange the doctors. Let our man in Moscow know about Endgame.'

* * *

'Look, look, we have your man!' Vladimir could not contain his joy.

The K2 agent carefully inspected the prisoner's face, the tattoos on his arm, a scar on his leg. Finally he asked, in perfect German, 'Which village were you born in?'

Rudenson managed to talk clearly through the improvised gag. 'Memmingen, Bavaria. You are Interpol?'

The K2 agent offered Rudenson a cold stare. 'I work for K2.'

Rudenson flinched back as far as he could go before gunmen slapped him and held him forwards.

Vladimir laughed. 'Ah, you see, he knows K2. He knows what waits for him.'

The K2 man stood, staring intently down at the prisoner. 'My employer has one final request, before you

take *him* to an airfield south east of Moscow tomorrow night.'

Vladimir puffed up his chest. 'Anything for my good friends at K2.'

'We want you to find several good surgeons and a operating theatre they can use. We want them to make some small ... *alterations* to this man before he flies home.'

Vladimir's eyes widened. 'Surgeons?'

'This has to be done before tomorrow night,' the K2 man insisted.

'Tomorrow night? My God, I have not slept! What must we do with these surgeons?'

'You must take our *guest* here to the surgical theatre and perform the operation listed on this paper.' He handed over the document, and a cheque. 'This is a Swiss banker's draft for ten million dollars, it can be paid into any bank in the world or drawn to cash.'

Vladimir readily accepted the cheque, studying it carefully. 'I can pay this to my bank, here?'

'Yes, the money will be transferred within one hour.'

Vladimir began to read the note, glanced at the prisoner, then read further. He swallowed several times before looking up. 'I think this man made a big mistake,' he informed the room, approaching Rudenson. 'Yes, my friend, I think you upset the boss of K2. It was a big mistake.'

He shook his head as he turned to the man from K2. 'I will arrange this very quickly. And then your boss, he will pay?'

'Tomorrow night.'

'OK, my friend, you can rely on me.'

'Do a good job, Vladimir, and make sure our friend here stays alive. In the future we may have more need of your ... *services*.'

‘Yes, of course. You pay well. And you are people of your word.’

* * *

‘We’re not going back to the old house,’ Beesely softly stated. Johno glanced up from his newspaper, but said nothing. Beesely eased up from his office chair and opened the fridge, retrieving a cold can of apple juice. ‘Everything there would remind us of Jane.’

Johno considered it. ‘Guess you’re right.’

Beesely sat back down. ‘I’ll have everything that was Jane’s removed and destroyed. Our stuff will be moved out as well. I’ve told Otto to find us a penthouse in London to use, plus something down on the coast - Dorset, Poole maybe.’ Johno nodded his approval. ‘I’ll leave the house to our people in the UK, safe house for boys on the run.’

Again Johno nodded.

Beesely glanced at his watch. ‘Be out of here in a few hours.’

Otto walked in as Johno wandered out, Johno tapping his half-brother playfully on the arm with his rolled up newspaper.

‘You wanted to see me?’ Otto asked as he entered.

‘Please, close the door,’ Beesely requested.

Otto closed the door and sat in the seat vacated by Johno. ‘Problem?’

‘Yes. You.’

Otto was puzzled. ‘Me?’

‘Yes. I want you to have a good long life and be happy,’ Beesely enigmatically began.

Otto tipped his head. ‘Sounds ... OK. What is the problem?’

‘Johno and I would like to go looking for trouble. Problem with that ... would be that it would put us all in

danger, something neither I - nor Johnno - have any issues with. Our problem ... is you. We don't want to put you in danger, nor do we have any desire to damage K2.'

Otto eased back, confused. 'I would not have considered myself an impediment to that approach.'

'My desire to keep you safe ... is the impediment.'

Otto studied Beesely for a moment. 'So what did you wish to do?'

'Discuss it with you, let you think about it. Then, if you are in agreement, we will sharpen the front end of K2, increasing the offensive capability.' Beesely eased back and waited.

Otto breathed out. 'When I ... *sought you out* ... for the inheritance, I considered this. That you may wish to be ... *involved* in matters that have previously been outside of the normal work for K2.'

Beesely held up an open palm. 'And?'

'I wish K2 to be more involved in such matters, but I am not sure just how, or to what level.'

'Then we shall have to discuss it on a case-by-case basis,' Beesely suggested.

'That would seem a reasonable course of action, Father.'

'Father?' Beesely repeated with a heavy frown. 'I can honestly say ... that *that* is the first time in my life I have heard that word used about me.' He shook his head. 'Seems a bit alien.'

Otto stood up, smiling. 'No need to worry, I am - as you say - house trained.'

'Er ... Otto, we say that when our dogs stop shitting on the house floor, not for when children grow up and become independent!'

* * *

In the dungeon, Johnno found Thomas cleaning the room. With a puzzled expression, he called the boy over, telling him to stop what he was doing. Noting the boy's look, and wondering about the boy's state of mind, Johnno directed him towards the small firing range. Taking out his pistol, Johnno released the magazine, and for ten minutes – talking both in German and English – went through the basics with Thomas, finally letting Thomas fire at a target, six rounds.

When he had finally secured a weak smile from Thomas he made the boy tea, sitting him down on the central sofa. With his own painful memories resurfacing Johnno began, 'When I was young, before about age twelve, I was happy - me and my mum were good together. I used to look out for her as much as I could, help around the house, do the garden. I quite liked being the man of the house. And I was good in school, top marks in a lot of stuff.

'But then she met a man, who was great to start with – first year. He bought us stuff, took us out. Usual bollocks.'

'Bollocks?' Thomas quietly repeated.

'Word means ... rubbish.'

Thomas seemed to understand, sat attentively listening, sipping his tea.

'But from my room I could hear them having sex, and I didn't like that.' He glanced at the wall. 'Didn't like that at all.' He lowered his head, staring into his tea for a moment. 'One day he came home drunk, hit her, so I got in the way. He hit me. And that ... was the start of it all, my life took a left turn. Till I was thirteen he hit me and my mum when he was drunk. Then one day he went to prison suddenly, Beesely arranged it.'

'Beesely?' Thomas puzzled.

'Mister Beesely is my real father, but he didn't live with us.'

Thomas was surprised, but understood.

‘He found out that ... this man was hitting us both, so he had him sent to jail for two years, probably three if I remember right. When he came out he was told to stay away, which he didn’t. He turned up drunk one day - his mistake - I hit him.

‘And I kept hitting him every time I saw him. Once hit him with a stick, once threw a stone and nearly blinded him. After that he gave up. But I never really recovered from that. Didn’t like going to school much after him, failed the exams. I left school at fifteen, no qualifications, got a job as a car mechanic - I was good with engines. Year later I joined the Army.’

Thomas cradled his tea. ‘My mother was very nice.’ Johno studied the boy as Thomas continued, ‘My father, he went away when I was four, but I can remember some things. Christmas was always very nice, sledging in the snow.’

‘I used to like Christmas,’ Johno said with a smile. ‘But you know what made me the happiest? When I earned my first pay packet. I took it home and gave it *all* to my mum.’

Thomas nodded slowly, deep in his own thoughts. ‘Yesterday, Mister Beesely was very sad, but he did not know my mother long.’

Johno considered his answer, taking a moment. ‘He was sad for two reasons. First, the people who sent the bomb, they may have done it to kill Beesely. So he blames himself for her death. Second, Jane was his daughter, my half-sister.’

Thomas was shocked. ‘She was a nice woman. We talked – but my English - not so good. You ... are very sad?’

‘No, is the simple answer. I don’t get sad, I get angry.’ Thomas considered the words, looking perplexed. Johno added, ‘If you want to survive in this world, learn the difference. Quickly. I was your age when I started to learn that lesson, just wish it hadn’t taken so long.’

* * *

Otto walked through the newly dedicated International Peace Garden in Bern, Minister Blaum at his side, tourists thronging around the blooming flowers. With their hands clasped behind their backs they ambled along at a very slow pace.

‘How has Beesely taken the death of his daughter?’ Minister Blaum enquired, not turning to face Otto as he spoke.

‘Badly, as you can imagine.’

‘Yes, a great loss. And what effect does it have on our overall position?’

‘They have continued to recruit more ex-SAS soldiers, the training continues at a good pace.’

‘And their reaction to Rudenson?’

‘As anyone might expect, although Beesely was a little surprised by how far we went.’

‘As was I,’ the Minister unhappily stated, a quick glance at Otto.

‘We needed to send a message,’ Otto insisted.

‘And is there any evidence that ... our enemies were linked to Rudenson?’

‘Some, but tenuous. No direct link is evident, some loose associations.’

‘Do you believe it was them?’ the Minister probed, making way for a tourist taking photographs.

‘It is true that Gunter’s will did mention some political groups, in fact some of those that Rudenson worked with, as you are aware,’ Otto quietly explained as they walked along. ‘But the one suspicious fact is that they moved quickly after Gunter’s death, too quickly. They should have waited the statutory six months after his death for claims to be made against the estate and the will. That

bomb must have been readied little more than six weeks after Gunter's death, which we did not widely publicise.'

'So, it *was* ... who we suspect.'

'Only by indirect evidence. But yes, I believe so.'

'They hoped the castle would be evacuated because of the gas.'

'Yes, of course.'

'I was surprised by the quick actions of the Americans and the Israelis,' Minister Blaum pointedly remarked.

Otto stopped and faced the Minister. 'As was I.' They exchanged uneasy looks. Walking on Otto added, 'They are ... gearing up for a fight, as the English say. Our psychological assessment of Beesely was completely correct; he has no desire to sit on a beach, despite previous plans for such a move. He has told me that he wishes K2 to become more aggressive, to recruit more agents.'

'And this man Johnno?'

'He is very good under pressure. He ... knows his craft, as Beesely says. And, strangely enough, he has taken our bellhop under his wing.'

'The boy who was orphaned?' the Minister puzzled.

'Yes. They are spending a lot of time together, something else that has surprised me. Johnno said today that Thomas reminds him of himself at that age, but that when he was that age he had no one to look out for him.'

'Having read Johnno's file ... I would not have expected him to behave that way.'

They exchanged looks, walking on.

* * *

Henry faced Kirkpatrick across the highly polished galley table. It was 7.03am and raining in Washington, the brass barometer pointing to 'Low'.

'It's very hard to call either way,' Henry stated. 'Everything Beesely has done has been to our advantage,

and greatly so. We're even meeting up next week in the Bahamas.'

'But with the new strength of K2, can we take the risk of exposure?' Kirkpatrick asked, of himself as much as of Henry, 'After that bomb he will be on his guard, tougher than before. You saw what he did to the Nazi groups.'

Henry agreed. 'I've arranged the removal of our assets in Switzerland, but we'll need one hell of a distraction to get them out without being noticed.' He sighed. 'Decades of research have gone into this, it's too valuable to risk - it's either him or the project. No, Beesely may have to be sacrificed, and we'll have to make that decision soon.'

Epilogue

1

‘You’re not going to like this,’ Willis suggested as he entered Dame Helen’s office, reading from a file.

She put down her pen and looked up. ‘What now? It’s five o’clock on a Friday!’

‘Beesely,’ he carefully mouthed.

‘Oh.’ She took off her glasses and eased back into her chair.

‘We’ve gathered some *unofficial* intel’ from a variety of sources, details still sketchy, but the gist of it is here. Plus we had some *very* detailed info’ sent directly to us from the old boy himself.’

She rubbed the bridge of her nose. ‘Give me the highlights.’

‘Death count of thirty six around Europe –’

‘Dear God,’ she whispered, straightening.

‘And rising. Wounded, two hundred seriously, another two hundred moderately, some missing.’

‘Christ,’ she quietly let out.

‘Not a good week for neo-Nazi groups in Europe. All headquarters wrecked, funds gone missing, computers and files removed. This has set them back fifty years. No one willing to meet, all too scared.’

She raised her eyebrows. ‘Can you blame them? Did you say something was sent directly to us?’

‘*This ...* you’re not going to want to read before bedtime. They’ve made some improvements upon *getting the chair*.’

Her eyes widened. ‘Improvements?’

Again Willis looked pained. ‘A more effective punishment.’

‘More effective? Than *the chair*!’

‘More horrific, in a really perverted sort of way.’

She sighed and eased back. ‘Just give me the main points, save the gore.’

‘Well, I don’t know what this guy did exactly, but he certainly made K2 mad. First, they rounded up a group of surgeons. Then they removed his toes, to clinical standards.’

‘Clinical standards?’ she puzzled.

‘The aim was to make sure he lived to a ripe old age.’

‘He’s alive?’

Willis held up a hand. ‘Let me plough through it, then you’ll understand:

‘Removed his toes. Removed two bones from inside each foot, hindering walking. Removed several key tendons from feet, ankles and legs, hindering but not preventing walking. And this is where the surgeons come in - done in such a way as to be irreversible by another surgeon.

‘Knee sockets adjusted to give permanent discomfort. Nerve removed to give semi-permanent lack of sensation down the left side. Two middle fingers of left hand removed, left thumb removed. All fingers of right hand removed, thumb left in place. All teeth except front four removed, two up and two down - looks like Bugs Bunny. Photo attached. Large swastika tattooed on forehead.’ He finished reading and looked up.

‘My God,’ she let out.

‘Best is yet to come. This guy was some sort of Nazi fundraiser apparently. Now he resides in a Jewish hospice somewhere under twenty-four-hour suicide watch. I guess his swastika tattoo won’t make him too popular.’

‘They’re making him suffer,’ she considered, rising and walking to the window. ‘Not just for now, but for years to come. Disabled enough to be in pain and discomfort, but not enough to be life threatening. Not a pleasant prospect, no chance of a quick death for him. And a clear warning to *others*.’

‘Doesn’t say what he did.’

‘I have an idea, which I am keeping to myself,’ she quietly stated. Then louder, ‘Oh, by the way, should we need it, Beesely has something on Rawlins.’

* * *

Guido Pepi sat back and read the report: ten ex-SAS troopers now in place in K2 and training the Swiss agents and guards, the facility decontaminated and now being decorated, the Swiss Government fully supporting Beesely. Rudenson, Graff and others, dealt with by K2, no track-back to him. And what they did to Rudenson ... a chilling threat. His shook his head, looking up and at the Cardinal.

The cleric reported, 'My contact in the American Government is meeting with Beesely next week, in the Bahamas.'

'Excellent. I look forward to hearing what he has to say.'

The cleric smiled, an unusual move for the man. 'They have their own concerns about K2, but for other reasons. They have not mentioned the files, or *the list*. And they are preparing a contingency for destroying K2.'

Pepi stood, closing the distance to the cleric with a concerned frown. 'They are?'

The Cardinal bowed his head, affirming the idea.

'I will need as much detail as you have. Eminence!'

With the cardinal gone a side door opened and a white-haired man stepped in. Speaking in German, the distinguished looking eighty-year-old said, 'This suggested American attack is an opportunity, but also a great concern.'

Pepi agreed.

The new man added, 'Any suggestion of them going for the files and we must act swiftly. Plans need to be in place before then. At no cost can the Americans have those files.'

2

Beesely raised a hand against the bright sunlight, squinting across to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, Thomas by his side. Johno's heavy footfalls could be heard, plus the odd '*Piss off!*' to Palestinians selling posters of the famous view.

'Seen our boy?' Beesely asked without looking around.

Johno drew level, a plain-clothes Mossad guard and uniformed soldier hanging back. He glanced at a tour guide pointing out towards the golden dome, the man's audience

quietly attentive. ‘Yep. Took him some grapes, some Lucozade and a porn mag’, he joked, ruffling Thomas’ hair and peering down over the railings at the white marble graves.

Beesely turned and squinted a question at Johnno.

‘Spoke to him in German and he seemed to perk right up. Then I said who I was and he got a bit misty, flew into a psychotic fit and they had to sedate him.’ He shrugged. ‘I think I stood on his foot by accident.’

‘And is he ... in good health?’

Johnno took in the view of the old walled city across the valley. ‘Considering. He’ll live a long time yet.’

Beesely turned back to the view. ‘Otto still wearing his skull cap?’

‘No, took it off. Bit pissed off with Israelis,’ Johnno answered, glancing at a group of attractive young lady soldiers in drab green uniforms, their M-16s slung across their chests. ‘Being a quarter Jewish doesn’t make you popular around here – certainly not with a Swiss-German accent it don’t. And when he told them he ran a Swiss bank...’

Beesely offered him a look of mock horror. ‘Anyway, they like me well enough.’ Johnno faced him squarely. Beesely explained, ‘When Otto first turned up in the UK I had him donate ten million pounds – my money technically – to Jewish foundations.’

‘And?’

‘He was happy to do so. If he’d been Swiss, but lying about his Jewish heritage, then he would have choked on that bit. Then we gave Mossad fifty million and he didn’t flinch. So, are we all packed?’

Johnno stopped Thomas from dropping his apple-core onto the graves below then put his hands in his pockets. ‘Yep. Where we off?’

‘Booked us a large villa in the Bahamas. You ... taking your young lady?’

‘Christ, no. You don’t take coal to Newcastle!’ Johnno tipped his head. ‘We need a yacht, of course.’

‘Oh, of course,’ Beesely agreed with mock seriousness. ‘Couldn’t be head of a bank without a yacht. So, has a certain Internet model finally agreed to meet you?’

Johnno was embarrassed. 'How'd you know about that?' He waved away a poster seller.

'I'm a spymaster,' Beesely pointed out, pride in his voice. 'Well?'

'Yeah, she said she would meet up.'

'Thanks to me!'

Johnno squinted at him. 'What?' he curtly demanded.

'I spoke to her on your behalf.'

'Why would she talk to you, wrinkly?'

'You forget, young man, that I am a 'Sir', and the Yanks like nobility.'

Johnno looked peeved. 'C'mon, let's go spend some money.' They turned and stepped to the road. 'Oh, by the way, found out who was tailing Max.'

'Whom, pray tell?'

Johnno lit up. 'His ex-wife got some detectives on him, she wants more money.'

Beesely smiled. 'Leave them alone, serves him right.' He lifted his satellite phone. 'Put me through to the British Alzheimer's Association.'

Johnno turned his head, a broad smile taking hold.

'Hello? How may I help you?' came a professional female voice.

'Hello? Beesely repeated.

'Hello, sir. How ... can ... we ... help ... you?'

'Why are you calling me?' Beesely asked.

'You rang us, sir. How can we help?'

'I had a note to call you, but I can't remember why.'

Johnno laughed so loud that the receptionist cut the line. 'Try this.' He raised his own phone. 'Put me through to the Australian Embassy, London, immigration enquiries.' They waited. 'I was hoping to emigrate to Australia, but I don't have a criminal record. Is it still required?'

Beesely laughed, but Thomas was not following, the grown-ups trying to explain the jokes as they drove off.

Donations: if you are following the series, and enjoying them, then kindly donate a dollar via PayPal (to gwresearch@aol.com). It helps to keep the writer writing, to produce more for you to read.

Assault

K2 Book 2

Geoff Wolak

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Format

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Contact

Email: gwresearchb@aol.com

This book is dedicated to my young niece ***Hannah***, who asked, and who is banned from reading it for at least ten years after 2007.

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About the series of books

K2 is a series of 6 books. If you have picked up book two, three, four or more - without reading book one - then please put it back down; the story will not make much sense without reading the books in series. They all follow-on closely and previous plots are not re-capped. Later books build on earlier events/characters.

This is a work of fiction, but based on real, current and historic scenarios. All characters are fictitious.

No garden moles were harmed during the writing/research of these books. The author does not advocate firearms as a suitable control of garden pests!

There are many 'facts' deliberately hidden in the book, made light of. 'Many a true word spoken in jest.'

Author's note

'It's largely based in fact. It is written as action-fantasy-fiction, since real life spying is way too boring for a novel.'

Inheritance
Assault
Revenge
Nazi Gold
Endurance
Crucifix

Glossary of abbreviations

P-26/P-27 - Swiss secret sleeper armies

UNA - Swiss Military Intelligence

MI6 - British Intelligence, aka, SIS - Secret Intelligence Service, for overseas operations (non-domestic), aka, 'Circus'.

MI5 - British Intelligence (domestic)

CIA - Central Intelligence Agency, USA, overseas intelligence service

SAS - Special Air Service, British Special Forces (similar to US Green Berets/Delta Force)

SBS - Special Boat Squadron, British, similar to US Navy Seals

DOD - Department of Defense - USA

MOD - Ministry of Defence - UK

NSA - National Security Agency, USA, aka 'No such agency'.

Reported to intercept 'all' the world's text messages and emails.

SOE - Special Operations Executive, British WWII covert operations OSS - USA, like SOE, WWII, overseas

DGSE - French Secret Service/counter terrorism - domestic and foreign

IRA - Irish Republican Army, terrorist movement

ETA - Spanish/Basque separatist/terrorist movement

Red Brigade - Italian communist/terrorist/crime gang

KGB - Soviet Intelligence, prior to 1990s.

NAAFI - Navy Army Air Force Institute - shops on British military bases.

SIB - British Military Police

BKA - Federal German Police, similar to FBI

FSB - Russian Intelligence, formerly KGB

Special Branch - British Police - anti-terrorism/organized crime

Wehrmacht - general term, German armed services WWII

COBRA - Cabinet Office Briefing Room 'A', used by British Prime Minister for meetings with security staff.

FARC - Colombian guerrillas/communist

British military slang

Oppo - opposite number/close working buddy

Pongo - soldier - derisive

Ponce/poncey - upper class/educated/effeminate - derisive

Regiment - he was 'Regiment' - he was SAS

Rock Apes - RAF Regiment - defensive unit of airfields

Rupert - officer/upper-class - derisive

Beast - punish soldier

Stripy - Air Force Officer, derisive term for ranking stripes

Billets - accommodation/food

Civvy - civilian

Badged - qualified entry to SAS, receipt of cap badge

Best bib and tucker - best suit/outfit/military dinner suit

QT - on the QT, on the quiet

Stag – on guard duty

The K2 guard waited, stood frozen to the spot, his comrades visible from the corner of his eye. He took a measured breath. Adjusting his pistol grip, breathing out in a controlled fashion, he lined up the sights of his pistol.

Movement.

He knew that many others had tried to kill this quarry; this slippery, illusive quarry that showed no fear, nor respect, of K2. This quarry did not know what it meant to 'get the chair'.

More movement. He held his breath and fired six rounds in quick succession, his comrades jumping up and running forwards. In an instant he had his trowel out, digging away the light brown soil, frantically searching for the quarry that had eluded him five times already today. He dug. With a fierce, angered determination, he dug. He found nothing, just a small tunnel. His comrades pushed him over, laughing.

'Twenty English pounds!' they shouted.

He stood, dejected, handing over the cash. Two hours of hunting Beesely's lawn moles had produced no results. He had a new appreciation for Johnno's dilemma.

A very British wedding

1

A large wall poster advocated the merits of cleaning your teeth regularly, a picture of a beautiful Caribbean girl with a smile that could light up a room. It fluttered slightly in the draft caused by a ceiling fan with worn bearings. Wearing colourful Hawaiian shirts, Beesely and Johnno now sat opposite each other on low cushioned chairs as they waited.

‘Why do doctor’s surgeries always have year old magazines?’ Beesely complained. ‘Is it some unwritten rule?’ He flicked through Caribbean News, Time Magazine and others, a strong American influence on the available selection. A very worn Playboy 1982 was an interesting find.

‘You do realise ... that I *really, really* hate doctors?’ Johnno quietly, but firmly, mentioned for the third time, picking at a scab on his knee.

‘How about nurses?’ Beesely asked without looking up, sitting back and opening the well-worn Playboy. He cocked an eyebrow at playmates with bushy pubic hair, the ‘fir bikini’ of that era.

Johnno swung his head around to the nurse sat at her station, catching her watching them. ‘They’re OK.’

‘Quiet backwater, low paid jobs ... she may desire a rich western sugar daddy,’ Beesely suggested as he turned the pages. ‘Why don’t you go flirt, take your mind off the smell of antiseptic.’

Johnno stood without a second thought and stepped across to the receptionist. Lifting his leg, Beesely studied his purple toe, cursing to himself. Then crying caught his attention, a young British woman being consoled by her parents.

‘Everything is ruined!’ the girl sobbed, her head nestled into her mother’s shoulder.

The family wore tourist clothes, displaying severe pink sunburn on their shoulders and faces; ‘lobsters’ as the locals called them. The girl appeared to Beesely to be in her early twenties, her parents greying and in their fifties. Beesely

listened in. The wedding had been planned for tomorrow, but the groom had injured himself on a ... jet ski ... nothing serious. Ah, no insurance, Beesely noted; at least no medical insurance that would payout for a jet-ski accident. And the hotel had lost their wedding booking ... or something.

He stood and stepped towards them, the toe would have to wait. 'Excuse me, but I couldn't help overhearing about your mishap. I own several hotels on the island and have a seat on the board of the Bahamas Tourist ... Board.' That did not sound as good out-loud as it had done in his head.

The father spoke first, the very man prideful. 'Damn hotel screwed up our wedding booking,' he said through gritted teeth, hand gesturing as if he was enthusiastically orchestrating a band. 'Now our boy has injured himself and these bunch of crooks won't do anything without insurance. Our insurer says they don't cover jet-ski accidents.'

Beesely nodded, offering a sympathetic expression. 'Yes, that's normal for any kind of dangerous sports, I'm afraid. Which hotel are you staying at?'

'The Wyndham,' the mother answered, now regarding Beesely suspiciously.

'And how many of you are there, might I enquire?'

'Twelve in total,' the father answered with a questioning look. 'Been planning this for two years.'

Beesely took out his phone and straightened. 'Otto, please.' He waited. 'Otto? I want the honeymoon suite in The Paradise, Coral Towers, for the next week, plus –'

'We can't afford that!' the father protested.

Beesely raised a hand and cut the man off. 'Plus executive rooms for another ten people. I want two stretch limos and a yacht for a wedding, the largest we can find. Have an extra car brought to the doctor's surgery straight away. Thanks.' He lowered the phone.

'We can't afford that –' the father began again.

'It will cost you nothing, it will all be taken care of,' Beesely quietly insisted.

A doctor appeared from a side room; white coat, wide collared shirt straight from the 1970s, dark skin and a potbelly.

‘Is that your doctor?’ Beesely softly enquired, tipping his head towards the man. They confirmed it was. ‘Doctor! If you please.’

The man glanced at the family, whom he had just rowed with, before reluctantly walking up. ‘Yes?’ he curtly asked, looking Beesely over.

Beesely produced a wad of thousand dollar bills from his trouser pocket. ‘This is towards the bridegroom’s medical bills. Twenty thousand enough?’

The doctor took the wad, staring wide-eyed at it. ‘Of course,’ he finally said, a deep and joyful West Caribbean accent.

‘Good, good. The rest goes to a local children’s charity. Have the young man transferred today to the honeymoon suite at the Paradise Hotel, Coral Towers, and treated on-site at the hotel from now on. OK?’

‘Yes, sir,’ the doctor enthusiastically boomed.

Beesely gestured the stunned family towards the door. ‘Shall we?’

A large American jeep pulled up a moment later, the guard in the passenger seat jumping out. Beesely walked up to the jeep and addressed the driver through the open passenger door. ‘For the next two weeks you are to drive this family around, cater for their every need. You are off other assignments, move your belongings to The Paradise Hotel.’

‘Yes, sir.’

The second guard opened the doors for the family to get in. They clambered up into the spacious rear, the daughter on one of the fold-down seats facing the rear.

‘So,’ Beesely began, clearing his throat when he noticed that the daughter was not wearing any knickers under her short skirt. ‘Let’s go spend some money shall we? First stop, your hotel. Let’s break the news to the gang.’

The guard without a ride ambled into the doctor’s surgery, Johno now resting an elbow on the secretary’s station and flirting. ‘OK, Boss?’ he quietly let out.

Johno glanced at the guard. Frowning, he asked, ‘What you doing here?’

The guard shrugged. 'Herr Beesely asked for another car. He's taken an English family to the Paradise Hotel.'

Johno quickly checked the waiting area. 'Balls.' He gave the girl his card and walked briskly out, getting into the jeep that had brought them originally, parked across the road in the shade. 'Paradise Hotel. Quickly.' He grabbed his phone as the guard jumped into the rear.

* * *

When Beesely, and his newly adopted friends, arrived at the Paradise Hotel complex, a large pink pyramid blocking the horizon, they found Johno stood with four guards and a dozen members of the hotel staff lining the hotel's busy entrance.

Beesely addressed the concierge. 'Arrange for the luggage of my guests to be brought from a hotel called The Wyndham later today, would you. Thanks.'

The overweight man, dressed in white short-sleeved shirt and short trousers, bowed slightly. 'Very good, sir,' he grunted.

Otto appeared with the hotel manager, Beesely leading the family towards him.

'Everything sorted?' Beesely asked.

Otto tipped his head to the family. 'The ceremony can take place on the yacht whenever it is desired, a Minister is ready,' he informed them in his mildly accented voice.

'Excellent,' Beesely enthused. 'I do love a good wedding.' He led the quietly stunned family into the air-conditioned interior.

Standing to one side Beesely called the newspaper reporter, Duncan. 'Beesely here.'

'Ah, how are you, Sir Morris?'

'Fine, fine. Listen, job for you. I want you to persuade Hello magazine, or similar, to do a wedding cover of an ordinary family. Bribe whoever you must, get someone out to the Paradise Hotel in the Bahamas straight away. It's an English family - in the honeymoon suite - who've had a few setbacks. I want to make the piece a ... *real life* story.'

‘I’m with you, Boss. What’s their name?’

‘No idea. Call operations and ask them.’

‘Will do. Leave it to me.’

Beesely turned to Johno as he put the phone away. ‘Been to any good weddings lately?’

Johno gave it some thought as he stood with his hands in his pockets. ‘Not for about ten years. And then it turned into a punch-up. SAS weddings have a bit of reputation.’

‘Pink tuxedos, I’m thinking.’

Johno leant closer. ‘Fuck off!’ he whispered. ‘And what is it with you and weddings? I’ve seen you attend loads a weddings back in the UK.’

‘Fond memories, my lad, fond memories. You see, back in my day a wedding was where you met the nice girls, especially during the war. Clean pressed uniforms, girls in nice dresses, *excess food* - such a contrast to the front line.’ He sighed contentedly. ‘Going to a wedding during the war was like winning the lottery today. You dressed up, got fed, drunk a little and danced the night away without worrying about your own mortality.’

Johno nodded to himself.

‘Are you with our tour?’ a middle aged American woman asked, stood now beside them in a size eighteen floral dress.

‘Which one?’ Johno asked. ‘The crocodile wrestling or the naked parasailing?’

She seemed put out. ‘Oh, I didn’t see those advertised,’ she complained to herself, frowning hard at the brochure in her hand as she wandered back to the desk.

They waited and watched. The girl behind the desk with the huge smile listened attentively, then stopping smiling.

2

The next day the wedding party were all gathered on the luxury yacht, moored now in the shallow and calm water of an isolated inlet. The lucky couple stood in front of the Minister and the yacht’s Captain, Beesely and his family gathered in a line at the rear of the large quarterdeck. Unfortunately, they

were in the sun and wishing proceedings to hurry along, the rest of the congregation gathered mostly in the shade.

‘Medium blue’ had been a compromise, although Beesely wished he had not been so drunk, or tired, when he agreed the compromise with Johnno. Now they all stood in medium blue tuxedos on the top, Bermuda shorts on the bottom, finished off with socks and sandals.

Then Beesely noticed a woman from the family turning and making eye contact with Johnno. ‘Oh ... gawd,’ he muttered.

‘What?’ Johnno whispered. ‘It’s a wedding - you’re supposed to find someone screwing in the cupboard. It’s a British tradition!’

Otto tipped his head forwards and whispered, ‘I thought it was traditional at English weddings for there to be a fight between relatives?’

Beesely rolled his eyes.

Johnno whispered, ‘That comes later.’

‘Oh,’ Otto whispered. ‘Good to understand your traditions.’

Beesely shot him an unfriendly look as the Minister finished up.

‘... may now kiss the bride.’

‘She is two month’s pregnant,’ Otto whispered. ‘Another English tradition?’

‘No,’ Beesely sighed. ‘It is more usual for the British to get married a year or so *after* the kid is born!’

‘Or in some cases, just piss off and enjoy yourself and let the mother raise the child,’ Johnno muttered.

Beesely took a step and signalled to two guards, the men walking quickly over. He whispered in their ears. They smiled, grabbed a startled Johnno under the armpits and threw him over the side head first, the family turning and laughing, cameras snapping. Thinking it part of some organised fun-and-games, several guests linked arms and jumped overboard, followed quickly by the bride and groom.

‘You do realise,’ Otto calmly pointed out as chaos erupted, helping himself to an abandoned cocktail, ‘that we have to return those tuxedos.’

Beesely turned to him, offering an exasperated look. 'It's a British wedding. If we get out alive ... it will be a good day.'

'Where is Thomas?' Otto enquired, glancing around. They couldn't find him, so peered over the side, finding him sat in a dinghy with a girl of his age, a bridesmaid.

Beesely sipped another abandoned cocktail as they observed the young couple. 'Well, depending on who he takes after, she will either be treated like a princess, or offered a few stiff drinks for a touch-up. Hard to say *who* he takes after.' She slapped his face, so he pushed her over the side, Beesely and Otto exchanging a look.

The two sets of parents approached as the hosts sipped their cocktails through straws, the quarterdeck now almost empty. 'We'd just like to thank you all,' the mother of the groom began, a beaming smile. 'We couldn't have dreamt of a better wedding day.'

The other parents were equally thankful. 'Who are the photographers?' one asked.

'Hello Magazine,' Beesely informed the shocked group. 'Luckily, they shot plenty of good photo's before everyone jumped into the salt water in their ... *hired* tuxedos.'

The parents suddenly felt guilty, glancing over the side at their offspring and guests swimming fully clothed in their expensive outfits.

'Not to worry,' Beesely offered, appearing unconvinced of his own sentiment. 'Love to see the look at the shop owner's face tomorrow.'

Otto offered, as neutral as ever, 'To be fair, he warned us about not getting sand on the clothes, nothing about salt water.'

Beesely forced a smile and turned to him. 'Let's tell him the boat sank then, shall we?' he said through gritted teeth. They all peered over the side at the swimmers.

'Could arrange that,' Otto muttered, slurping his cocktail through a straw.

Busman's holiday

1

K2 guards, now stood watch outside the villa gates, looked on with a professional interest as a taxi pulled up and parked on the opposite side of the dusty road, causing a chicken to scurry away; visitors were not expected. One guard discreetly pressed his phone three times, alerting those inside. Men began to move. The gate guards carefully scanned the area; the road, the vehicle, the sand dunes and scrub behind it leading down the beach and the choppy sea.

'Johno, we have company!' a guard shouted across the pool. 'Taxi here.'

Beesely lifted his head from where he lay face down and squinted in the bright sunlight. 'Johno?'

Johno eased up off his deckchair and walked around the edge of the pool to Beesely, slurping his beer - with ice cubes in - through a straw. He stopped level with Beesely's head. 'Yeah, what?'

'I was expecting some ... *unexpected* guests. Do me a favour, and try hard *not* to be surprised by *whoever* it is, or what they say or do. Defence comes in a certain ... *laid back* attitude.'

'Now that ... I can do.'

'Go meet whomsoever it is.' Beesely went back to his sunbathing.

Johno turned and grabbed his t-shirt. Approaching a guard he lifted the man's radio. 'Front gate, whoever it is, tell them they were expected. Be very cool, pretend we were expecting them.' Barefoot, he walked across the soft spongy grass and joined the main track down towards the front gate.

The guards watched as Mr. Grey eased out of the cab, smiling welcomingly at them, if not smugly. He paid the driver, who now waited with a curious gaze towards the guards, an elbow resting out of his window.

Dressed suitably for a hot Bahamian afternoon, short sleeve shirt and sunglasses, Mr. Grey walked across to the villa's gate. He was not unattractive, but looked the part, confident and dangerous, with prominent cheekbones and eyebrow ridges; he had taken a few knocks in his time. 'I'm here to see Mister Beesely. Tell him I'm from The Lodge.'

'You were expected,' a guard informed him as his associate opened the front gate.

Mr. Grey stopped smiling. 'I was? Specifically me?'

The guard nodded, as ordered, before checking the road in front of the villa's whitewashed walls. Puzzled, Mr. Grey stepped inside, to be met by Johno walking down the sandy track from the villa. As he neared, Johno held out his hand to shake. Surprised by the friendly gesture, Mr. Grey shook hands.

'Want a cold beer?' Johno asked. Then, without giving the visitor a chance to speak, shouted past him to the guards at the gate. 'Hey, tossers! Next time someone comes calling offer them a cold drink, huh! It's hot as hell today!'

'OK, Boss,' came back with a lazy wave.

Mr. Grey turned, squinting and frowning at the same time, before joining Johno walking back towards the villa.

The dusty track was lined with Jamaican Walnut trees, affording some shade from the hot sun, some occasional and welcome extra cooling coming from the mist of overlapping sprinklers on the neatly trimmed lawn. The villa's high wall afforded it plenty of privacy, as well as plenty of shade for the guards dotted along its length.

'Good flight down?' Johno asked, as matter of fact as he could make it sound.

Grey studied Johno slurping his beer through a straw, noticing the ice cubes. 'Fine. You ... were expecting me?'

'Actually, we were expecting you this morning. Get held up?' Johno was making it up as he went along. 'I hate airport spy novels.'

Now Mr. Grey struggled with many thoughts. His flight had been delayed four hours, but how the hell did they know? His identity was one of the world's best-kept secrets.

‘Did anyone tell Mister Beesely I was on my way?’ he enquired, trying also to sound as matter of fact as he could and remembering that Robert Ludlum novel he had read at the airport.

Now Johnno remembered where he knew that face from; American Sergeant, part of the chemical clean up team at the castle. He smiled, and the timing was perfect, Mr. Grey now considering himself the butt of some joke. ‘No, no one told us,’ Johnno suggested. ‘We have an old witch with a crystal ball. Came with the villa, along with melted chocolates on the pillows, and a fruit basket.’

They walked on; one amused, one confused.

‘Welcome,’ Beesely formally offered with a handshake, avoiding eye contact. Wearing a bright Hawaiian shirt and shorts he sat down on the veranda and gestured Mr. Grey towards a comfortable wicker seat adjoining his, not opposite. A guard offered Mr. Grey a cold beer as he sat.

‘No ice-cubes?’ Mr. Grey dryly queried.

Beesely shot Johnno a look as he stirred his beer with his straw, clinking the ice-cubes as he leant against the veranda railing.

Grey continued, ‘The Lodge sends its regards, sir. They are arriving as we speak.’ He sipped his beer.

Beesely sat deep in thought, staring out across the villa’s carefully tended gardens, the sun reflecting off the umbrella-shaped spray created by the sprinklers. ‘Give them time to freshen up. We can meet at the casino tonight. Say 10pm ... when it’s cool?’

‘I will communicate that suggestion to them, sir.’

‘Good, good. Well, time for a swim, some food and a rest first, I think. Not as young as I was, you know.’

‘May I enquire, sir, how you knew I was coming down?’

Beesely made direct eye contact. ‘With K2’s resources and my talents, young man, two plus two makes twenty-two, not four!’

Mr. Grey nodded to himself as Beesely stood and walked to the pool.

Johnno walked back over, trying to hide a smile. ‘Guess I’ll show you out then.’

Beesely swam to where Otto bobbed on an inflatable chair in the villa’s large pool.

‘All OK?’ Otto asked, a drink in either hand, his face turned up towards the sun. Otto was naturally pale, never having had a tan, and previous attempts had simply led to more freckles. So he now bobbed on the chair greased-up with high factor suntan cream, and looking like a channel swimmer.

‘Tonight I will introduce you to the most powerful men in the world. If they don’t buy the lies we tell them ... they will probably kill us all.’ Beesely took in a mouthful of un-chlorinated water and spat it back out again.

‘No pressure then,’ Otto muttered. Beesely smiled, flicking an insect out of the pool. ‘Are you going to brief me on what to say?’

‘No, it may sound rehearsed. Say little, let me take the lead and remember one thing: react to the small things, those of no consequence, yet do not react to the important stuff. Beyond that, we may be bugged ... so we can’t discuss it further out of the pool.’

‘Should be interesting.’

Noticing Thomas sneaking around a bush, Beesely swam a few strokes away, stopped and waited. Thomas ran, jumped, curled and landed next to Otto, the wash knocking Otto, and his two drinks, into the pool.

2

The casino’s staff were used to rich American visitors, tourists off cruise ships with plenty of money to spend. So as the rented limo pulled up they were not surprised and went into a well-rehearsed routine. Otto had been told not to call ahead, as he had wished to. It was, apparently, safer not to advertise the fact.

Young valets in bright red jackets opened the limo doors as guards pulled up behind in their jeeps, all now suitably dressed in black tuxedos. Otto, Beesely and Johnno stepped out,

straightening their jackets before walking up the red-carpeted steps. Thomas, kitted out in a perfectly tailored child size tuxedo, bounded up the steps to keep up. Stepping inside the shiny, gold-plated glass doors the benefit of the air-conditioning could immediately be appreciated.

Beesely stopped and asked for the manager. The casino manager, who turned out to be an American, greeted and welcomed them with a soft southern drawl. Beesely informed the man, 'We shall need a private poker table, big enough for ten or so.'

The manager bowed his head. 'Very good, sir. When you're ready just let me or the other staff know. In the meantime, please avail yourselves of the bar or any of the other facilities.'

Beesely turned and nodded to a guard, who now approached with a large silver case. Turning back to the manager he stated, 'And we would like one million dollars in assorted chips.'

The manager's cool composure slipped for just a moment. 'Of course, sir.' He beckoned two of his security staff and led Beesely, and the case, to the cashiers.

Ten minutes later the Beesely party all had pockets bulging with high value chips, the smallest denomination five hundred dollars. Even the guards had chips. With two of the guards leading Thomas to the slot machines, Beesely led the rest to the bar, the remaining guards now adopting a discreet distance and blending in.

At a quiet end of the bar the Beesely family sat, waited upon by attractive coloured girls wearing skimpy aprons adorned with large 'snake-eyes' dice motifs. As their drinks were placed down, onto beer-mats fashioned after roulette chips, Mr. Grey approached and sat without being invited to. A waitress hovered, but he waved her off.

'They will be here in moments. Where would you like to meet, sir?'

'We have a poker table booked,' Beesely informed him as Johnno slurped his cocktail through a straw.

'That's not a Singapore Sling!' Johnno complained, handing Otto the drink.

Otto took a loud slurp. 'No, it's a Moscow Mule!'

'No way!' Johnno objected.

Beesely grabbed the drink and slurped just as loud. 'Ah, now that takes me back. It's an old fashion Daiquiri.'

A discreet argument started up as Mr. Grey stood, trying to hide a puzzled look. 'I'll let them know where you are.' He was ignored as the debate raged.

'Olly!' Beesely enthusiastically called as he shook hands with the head of The Lodge. Then quickly, to the second and third man, 'David, Henry, good to see you both again.'

They greeted each other warmly before settling around the poker table. A young lady dealer had appeared but had been dismissed. Drinks were ordered as the group settled themselves, everyone sitting on high stools with small back rests.

Otto quickly studied the men sat opposite; they were all white-haired and appeared to him to be in their seventies. Their casual suits were expensive and perfectly tailored, their watches a statement of wealth, their demeanour one of quiet confidence.

Johnno had been given firm orders: lose everything in your pockets. He stood ready to give it a good go. First bet on the roulette table, number thirteen, ten thousand dollars whilst smiling coyly at the pretty woman next to him.

He lost, without taking his eyes off the girl.

Same bet, ten thousand. She frowned at the bet.

He lost, hardly registering which number had won, but noted her delicious cleavage.

Same bet, ten thousand. She stood open mouthed, leaning in and enhancing his view.

He won.

'What?' he asked as people began tapping his arm.

'Sir, three hundred and fifty thousand dollars.' The pile of chips filled a two-foot square area of the table in front of them.

'Oh, that mine?'

'Yes, sir.'

He shrugged, before turning to the girl. 'Pick a number. If we win, you get half.'

'Didn't I see that in a movie somewhere?' her husband asked in an accent Johnno couldn't place, manoeuvring between them. 'My wife does not need to be playing games with you, thank you.'

'She's got to get her fun somewhere,' Johnno muttered. Then louder, 'Everything on black.'

Gasps went up around the table as the wheel spun. He lost the mound of chips on the table, grabbing more from his pockets.

'Good,' he said as he placed another ten thousand on thirteen. 'Would've hated to carry those chips around all night.' The man led his wife away, the lady glancing back over her shoulder at Johnno.

Otto had found the contents of his pockets uncomfortable and so now emptied them onto the green felt tabletop.

'So,' Beesely began. 'You old dogs are still alive and going strong!' They laughed.

'Don't know about going strong!' Oliver joked.

'Thought *you* left us long ago,' David said with a smile.

'What? And no lavish funeral for you guys to mourn over me? How could you miss such an event?'

They laughed again as Otto earnestly focused on his chips, putting them into neat symmetrical piles.

'Gentlemen,' Beesely said as he swivelled his upper body. 'This is my number two, Otto.' Otto looked up and smiled politely, bowing his head to each man before returning to his study of his chips.

'How much does he ... know?' Oliver delicately broached.

'Nothing. Yet!' Beesely informed them.

'Is that ... *wise*?' David gingerly enquired.

'When I die, he gets everything and takes control of K2,' Beesely informed them, a glint in his eye. That sparked their interest, Henry particularly surprised, his eye's narrowing as he focusing on Otto. Beesely cleared his throat. 'Perhaps I should begin ... at the beginning.'

The visitors nodded their approval of that idea and sipped their drinks.

‘Just over a year ago I received word that old man Gunter was not long for this world. I hit upon the idea of altering his will some way, get someone we like in there - someone other than Otto here - who was the logical heir as Gunter’s son.’

Oliver appeared confused, as did the others.

‘But when I ... *gained access* to the will I was handed a real gift. Turns out that Otto here *is not* the biological son of Gunter. He *was* raised by Gunter, but everyone assumed he was not a union of Gunter’s marriage. Gunter *Schapphaust*, Otto *Schessel* – his mother’s name.’

The guests were now surprised, as well as confused.

‘Yes, came as a surprise to poor old Otto as well,’ Beesely explained, enjoying their looks. ‘The will stated that a lot of the money was to go to various neo-Nazi groups, the rest to various people who Gunter liked, almost thirty in total. Seems that Gunter knew the boy was not his, but raised him anyway.’

‘So I approached Otto and took the risk of telling him what I had discovered. He went off for a few months, did some blood tests and checking. Then he found out that Gunter had killed his real father ... *and* his mother.’

Otto lifted his gaze, suddenly stern features, glancing from face to face as the three geriatric powerbrokers shifted uneasily on their stools.

Beesely continued, ‘He came back to me and we hatched a plan. I had Gunter’s family tree traced. Turned out that his elder sister fled to England in 1937 and married some soldier in 1946. We forged some very old records, did a master job, made that soldier my brother.’

Oliver quietly laughed, shaking his head.

Beesely continued, ‘We then forged a new will and made sure that Gunter’s ill health did not ... improve. When he died ... well, the will reading was a shock for those in K2.’

‘We kept in the stuff about Otto not being his biological son, since we didn’t know if Gunter had confided in anyone. And it would have been very easy for someone to do a blood test. It then took months to track me down, going through the

motions. Otto manoeuvred his people into place and we removed the dissenters.

‘Otto had so many of his people in management positions that the transfer was seamless. A few raised eyebrows in the Swiss Government, but the legal evidence was there. Besides, easy enough to frighten the Swiss Government, what it is.’

‘Hell of a job, Beesely,’ Oliver commended, seconded by the others. ‘And getting access to the Swiss Banking Society as well ... hell of a job. Crowning point of your career.’ They gently rapped the table with their knuckles.

‘Thanks, but if it had come twenty or thirty years ago...’ His voice trailed off.

The old men considered it, each with their own memories.

Thomas appeared at the table edge, his two chaperones a few yards back. ‘Hello, sir,’ he said in English, addressing the guests.

‘Good evening, young man,’ Oliver said with a smile. Then in German, ‘You look very smart tonight. Are you winning?’

Thomas shook his head and turned to Otto. ‘A woman slapped Uncle Johnno.’

Otto sat counting chips. In German he answered, ‘I would be very surprised if a woman *did not* slap Uncle Johnno.’

The men laughed as Otto gave Thomas his lowest value chips. ‘Lose these on the roulette table.’

‘They say I am too young!’

Otto straightened, fixing on a member of staff who had been stood ready to attend them. He waved the man over. ‘Get me the manager. Quickly!’

The man raised his arm and spoke into his sleeve, the manager walking briskly across a few seconds later.

‘Sir?’ the manager enquired.

Otto remained seated, but turned his head, not fully. ‘You will allow my boy here to play on the roulette table, and any other table he likes, or we will buy the hotel chain that owns this casino ... then fire you.’

Two K2 guards closed in as the manager straightened. He glanced at them, then at the stern faces around the table. After a few moments consideration he relented and bowed, gesturing

Thomas towards a table. Otto sipped his drink, Oliver, David and Henry studying him carefully.

Beesely hid a smile. 'When I die, Otto takes over. And *he* ... will be your point of contact.'

Now Oliver addressed Otto directly. 'Herr Schessel, Otto, how much do you know about ... *us*?'

Otto raised his head, glancing at Beesely before facing Oliver. 'Sir Morris has said that you are a group of powerful American industrialists. Also something about *groups within groups, secrets inside secrets, lies on top of lies.*'

Oliver smiled at the colourful description of them. 'And how ... *in-tune* are you with Beesely's view of the world?'

Otto again glanced at Beesely, this time as if studying him. 'We agree on most things.' He and Beesely nodded their joint approval of the notion.

'And what do you see ... as K2's future role?' Henry asked.

Otto straightened his back and stretched a little. 'The preservation of a stable Switzerland, economically, and free from crime and terrorism, then the same for Europe where we have influence.'

The white-haired trio smiled and nodded their approval.

Beesely added, 'Being Swiss helps. Discretion from birth, stability ... and everything in measure.'

Johno walked up to their private poker table and grabbed a pile of Otto's chips, quickly disappearing. Otto had not reacted.

'How's Johno these days?' Oliver asked, watching him go.

'His old injuries are still a problem,' Beesely said with a sigh.

Oliver reflected upon that statement. 'You always felt for those you sent into harm's way.'

Beesely stared at the green felt tabletop for a moment. 'Especially those that never came back.'

'You've kept him on ... even though he's not in top form as a bodyguard?' Henry asked.

Beesely shrugged. 'You get used to people, even those as annoying as him!' Otto smiled widely. 'And those injuries he carries - I put them there.' He took a breath. 'They say that

most men can remember the faces of all their lovers. Well, they did in my day. I can certainly remember the faces of all those I sent out, never to return.'

Oliver considered Beesely's words. 'You always were a bit sentimental, especially towards the end. Not the ruthless killer you were in your youth.'

'We all change,' Beesely softly suggested.

'I guess so,' Oliver added after a moment's reflection. 'So, anything you need?'

Beesely noticed the single-finger gesture that Oliver made out of sight of Henry and David. It was gone in a second, but a clear signal that he needed to talk alone to Beesely. 'There will be, so make sure we have clear lines of communication. At some point you can spend some time with Otto, brief him and get him up to speed - I won't be around much longer.'

Otto suggested, 'You will have to come and visit, we will show you around Switzerland and K2.'

'Thanks for the offer,' Oliver replied, Henry remaining silent.

Beesely eased himself up. 'Otto, go and have some fun, look after Thomas, please. David, Henry, if you don't mind, me and young Olly have some catching up to do and a few drinks to down. Please, gentlemen, go and have some fun!'

Beesely and Oliver sat at the bar for an hour, the manager intervening several times to stop Johnno from being thrown out. Thomas showed an uncanny knack for picking winning numbers at roulette and was now attracting quite a crowd. Otto kept trying to suggest a methodical system, but Thomas was on a roll and having none of it.

Johnno had then discovered the secret lap dancing room and began making the girl's night with pink chips per every dance. Then he discovered the double-secret VIP area, now empty of male patrons. Fortunately, he still had close to sixty thousand dollars in his pockets so became the centre of attention. He carefully examined all twelve girls present, lining them up naked and selecting his chosen four, before retreating to the hot tub room.

It was a warm and clear night as Otto and Beesely sat on the veranda of the villa, sampling the local rum. Crickets made themselves heard from the grass, tree frogs competing above the din whilst dozens of moths fluttered about the porch lights.

‘Will we work with these people?’ Otto quietly asked, staring out into space.

Beesely took a sip. ‘They would be a very valuable ally. If what they want is in line with what we want ... then yes, we would work with them. It is also important to note that they *will not* ... leave us alone to do what we want. *They* ... have their own plans for us.’

‘You do not seem to trust them completely.’

Beesely sipped his drink. ‘Long story.’

‘And one that my best efforts could not reveal about you.’

‘Groups within groups, secrets inside secrets, lies on top of lies,’ Beesely ran off. ‘There are many things about me you don’t know, nor should ever risk trying to find out. Simply *knowing* some things would get you killed. K2 is a good organization, but it lacks the length of service that other agencies have, or their resources.’

‘What can you say about these people? They knew you well and, I think, respected you.’

‘I used to work closely with them. In fact, did so for fifty years on and off.’

‘American Intelligence? CIA? NSA?’ Otto probed.

‘No. I suppose they are closer to NSA than anything else, had a hand in its set up and mandate, but their group works above and behind all others. They ... are the original establishment, the *men in grey suits*.

‘They go back to the American Civil War, when it was decided by some rich families that power should lie outside of the White House. After all, and they are correct in this, Presidents come and go every four years. And the problem is that politicians and presidents often do things to get themselves re-elected, not what is best for the economy or the nation. These people help smooth out the excesses.’

‘And the American people do not know?’

‘There have always been rumours about secret groups, but The Lodge is way too powerful to get caught. Like us, they have people in every institution, including newspapers and television. And especially The White House.’

‘Do you *approve* ... of what they do?’

Beesely took a sip and gave it some thought. ‘I used to believe very much in what they do. Still agree with a lot of it, the principles at least. We manage to elect some real idiots - people capable of harming capitalism. *They* help to counter-balance the excesses. The Kennedy brothers were eliminated - well, allowed to be eliminated - because they risked lowering the standards of the Office of the President.’

Otto appeared surprised, making eye contact. A moment passed.

Beesely continued, turning away, ‘What they got up to was going to get the White House into a lot of trouble. Not just Marilyn Monroe, but a string of affairs, prostitutes, financial irregularities. The Lodge brought me in because I was neutral and unknown to our American cousins. I spied on the Kennedy boys. And if they had asked me I would have killed them to save what we believed in.’

He turned to face Otto squarely. ‘If Oswald, or *others*, had not successfully hit President Kennedy that day, I was waiting ready on the famous Grassy Knoll.’

Otto turned his gaze back to the heavens. ‘The Swiss Banking Society killed one Swiss Federal President and removed some others. Very discreetly, of course.’

‘Oh, of course,’ Beesely sarcastically agreed.

‘So I understand this principle. When the population sleeps, the soldiers of freedom patrol the streets.’

Beesely lowered his head in thought. ‘I’ve heard that before.’

‘*You* said it, 1964, at a meeting at MI6.

‘God, how did you come across that?’

‘It was in a old file on you, stored at MI5.’

‘Must let me have a read.’

‘Did your work with these people influence the arrival of the American and Israeli decontamination teams?’ Otto delicately broached.

‘Without a doubt. And the helicopters to scare the Serbs. Burke wouldn’t have had a clue as to why they were approved.’

Otto flicked away an insect that had landed on his knee. ‘How would this group react if they knew about us, my group, and what I did?’

‘They would probably be bloody delighted, but may also use it as leverage for blackmail. That’s why I lied to them, to keep you out of it. The less they know the better, to protect you.’

‘Blackmail? For what?’

Beesely studied him for a moment. ‘A subject that we must be very careful when discussing.’ Otto turned his head fully. ‘They want access to the Swiss secret banking Society, have done for sixty years.’

Otto did not follow. ‘Why?’

‘Because a great many terrorist groups use numbered Swiss bank accounts and could not operate effectively without them. Plus the likes of North Korea, Iran and Syria. What I did to the Nigerian Minister - in liberating his stolen aid funds - they would like to do on a larger scale. Rightly so, I suppose.’

‘Such action would harm Swiss banking, and the Swiss economy. The Society would never co-operate.’

‘Exactly,’ Beesely pointed out. ‘Catch-22. Stop terrorists and criminal gangs, wreck part of the economy of Switzerland.’

Johno walked past. ‘Going to check the perimeter.’ Then, as an afterthought and calling out through the dark he added, ‘Otto, watch the little monster, he still ain’t asleep.’

Beesely suggested, ‘Over here your body clock goes funny, sleeping in the day time when sunbathing, you don’t want to sleep much at night. I feel wide awake.’ He studied the contents of his glass. ‘Kind of hoping this rum will send me off.’

Otto stood. ‘I will check on the *little monster*. Then check on *you* later.’

‘Yes dad.’

Back to work

1

At twelve-noon in a Hungarian forest Ricky walked through a heavy summer rainstorm to the rear of a car he had just stopped. K2 agents had the driver and passenger spread over the bonnet, guns to the backs of their heads. Hungarian police stood guard nearby, ready to get rid of any passing motorists who might take an interest in the action on this quiet country road.

After glancing at a tractor labouring across a nearby field Ricky opened the car's boot and peered inside. A strong smell of oil and cigarettes greeted him, mixed with the smell of sweat and damp from the prior occupants, now spread-eagled at the front and getting wet.

Cold water ran off the car and down the back of his neck. 'Bastard!' he quietly cursed.

He found rags, blankets, tools and bottles of half drunk spirits with Cyrillic writing on the labels. One looked the colour of piss. Then there it was, the object of his interest, a large metal chest. It lay clipped shut, but not locked in any way. The reason for stopping this particular vehicle had been a tip-off about gunrunners, driving across Hungary and heading for Western Europe. They had come from the Ukraine. Supposedly.

Cautiously, he eased up the heavy lid of the box. 'What the hell?' he whispered to himself.

There were just ball bearings inside, thousands of shiny metal ball bearings. Propping the lid open with his shoulder he dug deep with his fingers in case there may be something hidden, his fingers finally touching the bottom of the chest. Nothing.

He withdrew his hand, the heavy lid slamming down, only to find his skin stinging. Realising that there may have been a hazardous chemical in there he quietly cursed himself for having dug his hand in, grabbed a rag and dried off his left

hand. Stepping back and straightening he shouted, 'There's nothing here!'

The guard who had been searching the front seats stood and raised his hands. Nothing. A very wet, and now very dirty, guard emerged from under the car, cursing. Also nothing.

Ricky kicked the side of the car. 'Release them!' With rain spattering off his face he turned to the Hungarian Police. 'Are you sure it's the right car?'

They glanced at the car number plate, then at a piece of paper, finally nodding.

'Fucking useless,' Ricky muttered, waving the local police away. Then louder, 'Back to the helicopter, boys.'

As the car made off, the driver and passenger were both laughing.

'That man, he put his hand inside the box!' they said in a language that none of the K2 agents would have understood. They laughed, long and loudly.

* * *

Guido Pepi stood inspecting his vines with his vineyard manager. Noticing the Cardinal stood patiently at the end of the terrace, and looking rather warm, he thanked his manager and walked down the slope. 'A fine afternoon,' he offered.

'Indeed,' the cardinal replied, Pepi leading the visitor towards the olive grove, a gentle stroll into the shade of the trees.

'And what news from ... where was it, the Bahamas?'

'Yes, the Bahamas. And a strange tale from Mister Beesely. He met with my contact, and some other American men – power brokers with influence, but not CIA.

'Mister Beesely explained how he and Otto got together after Otto discovered Gunter's will, cutting Otto out of the will and apparently leaving money to various right-wing political groups.'

Pepi frowned at that suggestion. 'I can see Gunter doing such a thing, but the Swiss Government would have had a copy of the will. They would have challenged it.'

‘Beesely suggested that they ... *dispatched* Gunter, that Otto moved his people into place, and that between them they carved up K2, admitting the inheritance was faked.’

‘Ah, I had suspected the inheritance had been falsified by the British. But the action of this man Otto surprises me. I met him several times and I always considered him a bit weak, especially around Gunter. What else? Any suggestion of involvement by the Swiss Government?’

‘None. It would appear as though Otto and this man Beesely organised the whole thing, re-directing the inheritance.’

‘Which the Swiss Government would have never allowed, unless ...’ He smiled. ‘Unless they saw where the inheritance led, and considered that having someone like Beesely sat in Gunter’s seat would assist them in their actions against us. Besides, K2 is – technically – a private body. So if this man Beesely gets into a fight with us –’

‘The Swiss Government could always deny involvement,’ the cardinal put in.

Pepi laughed. ‘A proxy war! How typical of the Swiss.’

* * *

In their wet clothes Ricky’s crew began their forty-minute flight back to Zug, the chance of a warm shower and a change of clothes. But as they flew across dense Hungarian forests Ricky could feel the pain building in his left hand. Now he noticed a redness developing on the skin.

Was it an allergic reaction to something? That had happened before. Was it some sort of acid mixed in with the ball bearings? Then the first spasm went up his arm, his violent jerk noticed by his fellow agents.

‘Ricky, what is it?’ they asked over their headsets.

Ricky grabbed his wrist and held up his hand, several blisters now visible. ‘I touched some chemical in that box, maybe acid.’ He grimaced with pain, cursing under his breath.

An agent produced a water bottle and emptied it over Ricky’s hand, showing little regard for the inside of the

helicopter. Between them they rubbed it down as best they could, stopping when they noticed skin starting to come away.

‘It could be a chemical agent, or nerve agent!’ a man shouted.

The pilot glanced over his shoulder, nosed down the helicopter and increased the pitch, rapidly accelerating through a mountainous valley and skimming low over a lake the colour of lead. He got on the radio to Zug. ‘Emergency! We are coming in fast with Ricky injured, he may have been exposed to a chemical weapon. All hazard protocols to be observed.’

‘We should stop!’ an agent suggested.

‘No!’ Ricky shouted, clearly in pain. ‘It’s only thirty minutes to Zug. If this is a chemical weapon we can’t risk going anywhere else!’

‘Then we are all infected!’ an agent protested.

‘Check yourselves!’ Ricky barked. ‘Check all your skin! Does anyone feel unwell?’ They were all fine. Ricky insisted, in a horse whisper, ‘It’s a chemical I touched, you’re not at risk.’

‘But *your* life is at risk!’ they protested as the helicopter banked hard through the mountains, the rain-blurred visibility making this high speed low level journey life-threatening in itself.

Domestic Austrian police, having a cigarette break on a bridge over a weir, ducked and cursed as the French-made Squirrel helicopter shot overhead. They radioed in their complaint.

‘Put a tourniquet on my forearm!’ Ricky shouted. The man next to him obliged with a length of cord. Holding up his hand Ricky stared, amazed to see now that his skin was all red, covered in blisters and starting to bleed.

* * *

Johno took the call. Ricky had put his hand in some chemical and burnt his skin, due to land at Zug soon, medical staff standing by. Stupid sod, he thought.

Could have been worse, he considered, could have been shot or injured. He went back to his breakfast, Otto and Beesely off for a typically Swiss early morning dip.

2

By the time they touched down at Zug some thirty minutes later Ricky lay incoherent, an agent having administered a morphine shot. Now they bundled his limp body out of the helicopter and into the hands of the spacemen who stood ready on the tarmac in front of the castle. Placed onto a trolley, Ricky was quickly wheeled to a new decontamination unit that remained in the process of being completed and decorated.

Inside the all-white clinical area the bio-suited medics started to cut his clothes off, careful to place the garments into sealed containers. Ricky groaned, drifting in and out of consciousness, his vitals monitored by a doctor.

‘His breathing is OK, pulse a little erratic, but not life threatening.’

‘We need a chemical work-up on his skin. We must identify the chemical quickly. Atropine!’ A doctor injected Ricky with Atropine, the universal antidote to nerve agent and other chemical agents. It did not alter his condition.

‘Look, there is blood from his eyes and nose!’

Now down to his underpants, Ricky lay still and seemingly lifeless, red blotches and blisters on the left side of his pale torso.

‘This is odd,’ a doctor said, pointing. ‘He has blisters under his clothes, but there could not have been any chemical transfer.’

‘It is only on the left side.’

An assistant sat preparing chemical test swabs when he noticed three white plastic badges clipped to the wall; they had small black dots on them. ‘My God!’ he muttered. Then louder, ‘Radiation. Radiation!’

The medics jumped back from Ricky’s body, turning to face the assistant who now grabbed the white badges off the wall. He held them up for everyone to see.

The senior doctor opened a cabinet, fetching a brand new Israeli Geiger-counter, still in its box. Through his suit gloves he fumbled to switch it on. It started to click. He turned the volume up full, then the sensitivity.

He pointed it at the first man, head to toe. 'Normal!'

He pointed it at the second and third man. The same.

He swung it around the room. Nothing.

Then at Ricky's legs. An elevated reading.

Then at Ricky's arm; a high reading, a lethal dose.

'Everyone out! Now!'

The senior doctor was the last to leave. He was about to go when Ricky started groaning. The medic hesitated, grabbed two morphine vials then quickly emptied the entire contents directly into Ricky's neck. 'Good bye, my friend.'

* * *

Johno took the call at the villa. Otto and Beesely were swimming at the nearby beach, Thomas in the pool with one of the guards. For a moment he simply let the phone hang down, staring ahead. Then he tipped his head back and screamed, causing the guards at the villa to come running. He took a deep breath. 'ALARM!'

They sprinted towards the beach, several with guns drawn, eliciting worried looks from the sprinkling of tourists nearby.

'Beesely!' Johno screamed, trying to run across the hot sand barefoot and ignoring the pain.

Guards had already been in the water with Otto and Beesely, at a discreet distance, and now grabbed them, helping them towards the beach and struggling to move quickly through the surf.

Johno met them at the water's edge. 'We need to get back to the castle!' They started to head up the beach, the guards flanking the wet men as they ran. When Johno noticed an agent handing Otto his phone he shouted, 'Get us a helicopter, ready the Gulfstream, we need to get back to Zug!'

Otto started shouting into the phone.

‘What is it?’ Beesely asked as they reached the road that separated the villa from the beach. Their jeeps were pulling up, screeching to a halt on the sandy tarmac and skidding.

Johno put a hand on the back of Beesely’s head, their faces almost touching. ‘Ricky’s dead,’ he quietly stated. ‘Fucking radiation poisoning!’

Beesely said nothing as he was helped into the back of a vehicle, still wet and trying to slowly put on his shirt. After a moment he faced Johno, but again said nothing as they exchanged a look. Their jeep pulled off, skidding and screeching on the sandy surface as Otto screamed down his phone, too fast for Johno and Beesely to understand.

Beesely put a hand on Otto’s shoulder, quietly ordering, ‘Condition Black, all facilities and operations.’

Otto half turned his head and nodded. They drove on, the hot sun beating through the windows, the glass polarising its rays.

Beesely stared out of the window. Tourists were enjoying the warm afternoon, local buses ambling along poorly maintained roads. Scooters flitted past and roadside shacks plied their wares. He let his head drop, suddenly desperately tired. Sand, moist areas, a fly walking across his sand-covered feet, a small piece of seaweed, the purple toenail that still hadn’t been seen to.

Johno simply stared ahead. They said nothing until they reached the helipad some fifteen minutes later, Otto and Johno jumping out.

Beesely raised his phone. ‘Put me through to Oliver Stanton, Chairman of The Lodge.’ He waited, the sounds of a helicopter engine whine filling the car.

‘Beesely, hi,’ came a cheerful voice. ‘I just landed back in Washington.’

‘Listen, we’ve suffered an attack,’ Beesely quietly stated in a hoarse whisper. ‘This time it’s radiation contamination.’

‘My God, are you sure?’

‘My man Ricky is dead, from radiation poisoning.’

‘Jesus. Any clues as to who may be behind it?’

‘It can only be at government level.’

‘I hear you. East European?’ Oliver suggested.

‘Hard to tell yet. We’re flying back, so see what you can find out.’

‘Will do. On top of that Russian defector killed in London a while back - this is going to stir things. And if it turns out to be Russian –’

‘Yes, I know. I’ll call you when I have further intel’. Stepping out of the jeep briefly Beesely told Otto to hold the helicopter. He needed information and he eased back inside, ordering the doors closed to insulate himself from the helicopter’s growing wash and noise.

‘Operations, sir,’ came from his phone.

‘Beesely here. Is anyone else sick?’

‘No, sir. Only Herr Ricky. The staff who were in the helicopter with Herr Ricky only have very small traces of radiation, sir.’

‘Has the facility at Zug been checked?’

‘They are going around now with Geiger-counters now, sir, but so far there is no sign of any problem.’

‘What do we know about how he was contaminated?’

‘He was in Hungary on a mission to intercept Russian gun smugglers. The agents with him stated that he put his hand into a strong metal box and afterwards he had a rash on his left hand, which they thought was from a chemical.’

‘What was in the box?’ Beesely puzzled.

‘Small metal ball bearings, sir.’

‘Oh, hell!’ He rubbed his forehead. ‘When was this exactly? What time did Ricky touch the box?’

‘That would have been one and a half hours ago, sir.’

‘Thank you.’ He pressed the red button. Stepping down from the jeep he waved Otto and Johno back over. As they neared he shouted ‘Get in!’ above the roar of the helicopter’s engines.

When it fell quiet again he pressed green on his phone. ‘Oliver Stanton again, please.’ He waited, Otto and Johno listening intently. ‘Oliver? Situation critical, radioactive dirty bomb, central Europe, attack imminent - Western Europe.’

Stanton paused. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes. Now go do what you’re good at. Give me an hour, then alert the heads of state in Western Europe.’ He hung up.

‘Dirty bomb?’ Johnno asked with a heavy frown.

Beesely explained, massaging the bridge of his nose, ‘Ricky intercepted a car after a tip-off, supposedly smuggling weapons. He found no guns, but a metal box in the rear had thousands of small metal ball bearings, all highly radioactive, the components of a dirty bomb.’

‘Dirty ... bomb?’ Otto repeated with a puzzled expression.

Beesely quietly explained, glancing out at the guards flanking the car and a small domestic airliner landing in the distance, ‘You put the radioactive ball bearings around normal explosives, then set it off. The ball bearings cover an area of maybe a square mile, making that area radioactive for the next five thousand years. Alternatively, you just dump the ball bearings in the streets and watch the hospitals fill up with millions of sick people, the doctors baffled as to what’s going on.’

‘*We* can’t have been the target then!’ Johnno snarled, Otto agreeing.

‘No,’ Beesely confirmed with a shake of his head. ‘More likely Frankfurt, Paris or London.’ He turned to Johnno. ‘The radiation level was so high it killed Ricky in an hour.’

‘An hour? That’s fucking impossible!’ Johnno snorted.

‘That is not correct,’ Otto reluctantly informed them, glancing at Johnno from under his eyebrows. ‘The senior doctor gave Ricky ... a lethal dose of morphine to the neck.’

‘He what?’ Johnno screamed directly at Otto, a flash of anger in his eyes. ‘I’ll kill him!’

Beesely put a firm hand on Johnno’s arm. ‘If the doctor did that then he had his reasons,’ he calmly stated. ‘Radiation poisoning at that level ... is like nerve agent. Ricky would have been screaming his lungs out –’

‘I could have still spoken to him! ONE ... LAST ... TIME!’ Johnno jumped out of the car, slamming the door before setting about smashing the vehicle’s rear lights.

Otto watched him through the rear window, concerned. ‘First Jane, now Ricky.’

Beesely stared at the sandy floor. The fly remained, still walking about. ‘We are in the front line.’ He took a deep

breath, raised the phone and dialled. 'Dame Helen, MI6.' He waited.

'Sir Morris, how the devil are you?'

'Shut up and listen,' he croaked, losing his voice. 'Condition Black, attack imminent, Western Europe, radioactive dirty bomb.'

'Do you realise what you are saying?' she screamed.

'Yes, my dear, and I have another funeral to arrange. Ricky's dead, from radiation poisoning.'

'How?'

'He actually intercepted the components of the bomb, but didn't know what they were. He handled a metal case full of small ball bearings, but not knowing what it was he let them drive off and an hour later he was dead.'

'An hour! The level of radiation must have been off the scale.' Fogged, Beesely overlooked correcting her assumption. 'What intelligence do you have on the target?'

'Nothing on the intended target, I'm afraid. The vehicle was intercepted in Hungary two hours ago. It could be in Italy, Austria, Germany or the Czech Republic. My concern is the ferry ports.'

'Yes, of course. They're not going to get a heavy metal case on a domestic flight!'

'Get moving, Helen. Oh, and Helen ... God help us all!'

3

Dame Helen placed her phone down, the colour having left her face. She took a breath and rubbed her forehead. 'Christ!' She pressed a button on her desk phone.

'Ma'am?'

'Condition Black, all ferry ports and channel tunnel. I'm declaring an emergency.'

'Ma'am?' the woman's voice repeated.

'You heard me!' Dame Helen barked. 'Condition Black, attack imminent. Get me the Minister!'

'He'll be in Parliament.'

'Shit!' she cursed, banging the desk with a fist. She tried to think clearly. Gambling her career on Beesely's word she

shouted, 'I want Parliament evacuated on my authority, and call a Terrorist Incident COBRA meeting on my authority. Now move!' She packed her bag, grabbed her mobile and headed for the door as Willis walked in.

'I heard shouting?'

As she drew level with him she stopped. 'We have a dirty bomb heading this way from Europe. Call down for the car.'

As the door closed behind her Willis dialled. 'Honey, get the kids out of school. Yes, right now, and then get down to your mum's in Newbury. Yes, big problem in London.'

* * *

Driving down through the Tivoli Hills, down towards Rome, Pepi took a call as they passed through Villa Adrianna.

'Guido?' came a German voice.

'Yes, sir.'

'Several European Governments have just been warned about the ball-bearings.'

'I have heard nothing!'

'Then you are slacking, Guido.'

'Was one of the cars stopped?'

'No, that is the concern. The cars are proceeding, but K2 has issued the registration of one.'

'A leak?'

'You must check back carefully, find this leak and deal with them.'

'Yes, sir. Leave it with me.'

* * *

In the galley of a yacht moored at a Washington marina, Henry O'Sullivan now sat opposite senior CIA manager James Kirkpatrick. He tapped the boat's brass barometer, the arrow pointing towards 'Fair'.

'How were the Bahamas?' Kirkpatrick asked, his tone clearly indicating that he was not making an enquiry into an innocuous holiday.

‘Oliver spent an hour talking with Beesely alone,’ Henry informed him.

Kirkpatrick took off his glasses and eased back into his wooden chair, which responded with a squeak. ‘Do you think Oliver said anything to Beesely?’

Henry made a face and shrugged. ‘Probably just chatting about old times.’

The yacht moved slightly, stretching its moorings, a creak of rope issued. In the distance the bell of a buoy gently rang out as Kirkpatrick suggested, ‘There’s been no enquiry, nor interference, to this project from any quarter - especially not in Europe. And some elements are right under Beesely’s nose.’

Henry stood and peered out of a porthole, clasping his hands behind his back, many things on his mind. A moment passed.

Kirkpatrick asked, ‘What do you make of this dirty bomb alert?’

Henry turned his head, but without making eye contact; he stared at the slatted wooden floor. ‘A worry. If it’s a credible attack and goes off, a whole new playing field. We’ll all feel the fall-out.’ He lifted his gaze and quickly tipped his eyebrows. ‘No pun intended.’

He returned to the porthole. ‘But there may also be an ... opportunity here. Beesely is going after the bomb, and *that* is a dangerous pastime. *Whoever* ... sent the bomb may take umbrage at K2 intercepting it.’

Kirkpatrick frowned as he puzzled that odd statement. Finally he said, ‘He may not survive the tangle.’

Henry glanced over his shoulder at Kirkpatrick. ‘Which would close a concern we have, without destroying the structure of K2.’ Henry turned back to the porthole. ‘There are many factors in play, we must be ready to react at a moment’s notice. And I am suspicious about Oliver.’

* * *

‘My Government will outline our policies on that area within the next few weeks and –’

The commotion from the main entrance to the chamber of Parliament distracted the Prime Minister. In ran two men in suits holding radios, followed by a dozen uniformed police officers.

‘Evacuate the chamber, gentlemen, we have a terrorist incident!’ the suited officer shouted. He focused on the Prime Minister and rushed directly at him. ‘Come on! Move it, sir. You must go now.’ He grabbed the P.M. under the armpits and headed him towards the rear entrance, behind the Speaker’s chair.

‘Slowly, gentlemen, slowly,’ the Speaker called. ‘Keep it orderly please!’ The noise level rose as members of parliament started to file out, mostly in an orderly fashion.

‘What the hell’s going on?’ the P.M. demanded as they navigated the narrow corridors.

‘SIS have pushed the panic button, sir. Attack imminent.’ They rushed towards the rear entrance.

4

Beesely dialled, now sweating as they sat in the warm jeep. ‘Get me German Minister Wilhelm.’ They waited.

‘He is in a meeting, sir.’

‘Tell him it is an emergency ... and that I must speak with him now.’ They waited another minute.

‘Sir, I cannot get past his secretary. She will not disturb him.’

‘Ask his secretary to pass him the following note - nuclear device on German soil in the hands of terrorists.’

‘I think this may get his attention,’ Otto quietly stated, a look of pain and anguish etched into his face. He turned his head and peered through the rear windscreen. Johnno now sat on the ground outside, propped up against the wall of a nearby building and chain-smoking in the shade.

* * *

Wilhelm glared at his secretary as she interrupted the meeting. With him sat the German Chancellor herself and two French Ministers.

The secretary approached, looking terrified, but not of her boss. 'Sir, there is that English man on the phone, Herr Morris Beesely.'

Wilhelm glanced awkwardly at the French Ministers, his Chancellor frowning her recognition of that name, recent events still fresh in her mind.

Unfortunately for them the secretary blurted out, 'He says that terrorists have a nuclear bomb ... and it is on German soil!'

* * *

'You sound out of breath, Minister,' Beesely sarcastically stated as Wilhelm came onto the phone a few minutes later.

'Beesely, do you know what you say?' Wilhelm shrieked.

'Yes, I do. And we have another funeral to go to. One of my best people just died from radiation poisoning!'

'What?' Wilhelm screeched.

'Listen carefully. There is a radioactive dirty bomb heading from Hungary towards England. By now it may be driving across Southern Germany.'

'We are not the intended target?' Wilhelm asked, a degree calmer.

'I don't know. Maybe Frankfurt, Paris or more likely London. I just don't know. Do you want to take the risk that they just drive through?'

'What information do you have?' Wilhelm asked, much calmer now.

'Two men in a green estate car, a large metal box in the rear full of radioactive ball bearings. It came from the Ukraine. My people will send you the car number plate. That's all I know for now. What you do is up to you.'

Unknown to both of them, the two French Ministers were screaming down their mobile phones as they ran through busy corridors.

Beesely hung up then asked for Minister Blaum.

‘Herr Beesely? What is going on, we are all on alert?’ came a concerned voice.

‘My man Ricky was killed by radiation poisoning.’

‘Radiation?’ Blaum shouted. ‘My God, is the castle contaminated?’

‘No, thankfully. This happened in Hungary.’

‘Hungary? What is the connection?’ Blaum asked in a normal voice.

‘There is a green estate car driving from the Ukraine to, I believe, England. It contains the components of a radioactive dirty bomb. My man Ricky stopped the car, handled the radioactive metal and was contaminated. But he let the car go ... and by now it could be anywhere.’

‘Inside our borders?’

‘Most likely they will drive through Germany towards the channel ports, Calais maybe.’

‘But they *could* pass through Switzerland?’

‘Yes, it is possible,’ Beesely admitted.

‘I am closing the borders!’ Blaum hung up.

Beesely held the phone. ‘That’s what I like to see,’ he quietly stated. ‘A man of action.’

Without the engine running the car grew rapidly warmer, both of them now covered in sweat. Beesely twisted around and studied Johnno through the rear window, Johnno now sat with his head in his hands. ‘Time to go. I’ll handle Johnno.’

5

The helicopter took them the short, twenty-minute flight across the inviting blue ocean to the main international airport at Freeport where their Gulfstream business jet stood waiting. Otto had ordered their luggage brought and they sat quietly in the plane as it awaited permission to leave and an available slot.

As they waited, sat in the air-conditioned Gulfstream, Beesely got a call. ‘It’s who?’

‘Herr Mole, sir. He is a new recruit with us,’ came from the phone.

‘A new recruit?’ Beesely puzzled. ‘And he wants to talk with me?’

Otto eye’s widened, the operator explaining, ‘He was friends with Herr Ricky, sir. He says he has some important information.’

Beesely glanced at Otto and took a breath. ‘OK, put him through then.’

‘Herr Beesely?’ came a slow voice, a heavy Germanic accent.

‘Yes. Herr Mole?’

Now Otto remembered the man, the short man who stared down Ricky at gunpoint.

‘Yes, sir. I have some information I believe may help.’

‘Help with what?’

‘With finding the car with the radioactive ball bearings, sir.’

It came over as an oddly threatening accent, Beesely considered, like the words spoken by a Nazi interrogator in a black and white movie about the Second World War. ‘What do you know?’

‘I remembered reading about the launch of an American satellite three years ago, NSA I believe. It is said to be able to detect small amounts of radiation, for this very purpose.’

‘By God, why did I not think of that! I just had a drink with the men who launched it.’

‘You did?’

‘Thanks, Herr Mole, you have been very helpful.’ He hung up and asked for Oliver Stanton. They waited.

‘Beesely?’ came Oliver’s deep, rich voice.

‘Olly, do you have a satellite that can detect low levels of radiation?’

‘Yes. Oh, I see where you are going with this. But it’s in geo-stationary orbit over the US. Scans us only.’

‘Damn it! Can it be moved?’

‘Not without a Presidential order!’

Beesely breathed deeply. ‘Still, you could earn some real smarty points from the Europeans on this. If you come to the rescue of the French or Germans it would help.’

‘I can see that, but it would be very tricky, plus about eight hours to move it, probably longer. But ... but there is another way. We have the same technology stuck on an Air Force 747.’

‘Where is it?’ Beesely asked, squinting out of the small round windows as men in orange plastic waistcoats and ear muffers moved about.

‘Israel at the moment, can’t say why.’

‘I want it!’

‘I’ll get back to you,’ Oliver promised, and broke the connection.

Beesely gave Otto a questioning look. ‘Herr Mole?’

‘I met him,’ Johno quietly offered without taking his gaze off the aircraft window. He sat alongside Beesely, but now faced away from him. ‘Five foot nothing tall ... bald ... tubby ... a limp ... bad eyesight ... strange accent.’

Beesely gave the side of Joho’s head and intolerant glance then addressed Otto. ‘No, really, who is he?’

Otto replied, ‘He is just as Johno described.’

Beesely’s eyes widened. ‘And we recruited him to do what, exactly?’ he asked with a pained expression.

‘He helped us track the Nazi fundraiser, Rudenson, without even being asked,’ Otto explained. ‘Ricky put a gun in his face and he did not move. Afterwards, Ricky brought him in. He is very intelligent.’

‘So it would seem. He may just have saved Western Europe.’

Thomas arrived in another helicopter, a little bewildered and complaining about cancelling the holiday early. Johno offered him a ride up front with the pilots as compensation, no one mentioning that they had all forgotten him and left him behind in the villa. An hour later they were heading towards the Azores for their next refuelling stop, Otto calling ahead and offering large sums of money for a fast refuelling.

Neither here nor there

1

At Number Ten Downing Street the COBRA meeting quickly came to order. Dame Helen was present, but on the phone - they were all waiting on her attendance. Finally she finished and sat down next to the usual representative of MI6. Rawlins from MI5 was also present for this session, but it was not usual for either of them to attend in person.

The PM's personal secretary interrupted, stepping quickly through the door, 'Prime Minister, the French have closed their border with Germany, absolute chaos. Swiss have closed their eastern borders as well.' The man disappeared as quickly as he had arrived, leaving Rawlins puzzling that statement.

The Prime Minister addressed Dame Helen directly. 'Can you bring us up to speed on what we know.'

'We've received intelligence from Europe that a radioactive dirty bomb is on its way west from Hungary by car.' Members glanced at each other. 'It is thought to have originated in the Ukraine.'

'Dear God!' the Home Secretary muttered, clearly stunned. The rest were equally as shocked.

The Prime Minister took a moment to consider it. 'Do we know who the target is?'

She shook her head. 'No, Prime Minister.'

'And how accurate is this intelligence?' the PM asked.

'I trust it,' she stated. 'The group who sent us this information just lost one of their agents. He died from radiation poisoning an hour after intercepting the suspect car.' People whispered to each other.

'So how come the car is still out there?' the Police Commissioner's representative asked.

Dame Helen answered, 'They did not recognise what it was until their staff started getting sick.'

'You wouldn't,' the SAS representative confirmed. 'Radiation takes time. It's invisible, has no odour or taste. You can't *see* radiation.'

‘Yes, quite,’ the P.M. stated. ‘Recommendations?’

Rawlins turned to Dame Helen. ‘Which agency sent us this info?’

She seemed reluctant to answer that in an open meeting. ‘It came from our friends in ... Switzerland.’

‘You mean, Sir Morris Beesely?’ Rawlins asked, enjoying her discomfort.

‘Beesely?’ the P.M. repeated. ‘Didn’t he tip is off recently?’

‘Yes, Prime Minister,’ Dame Helen answered. ‘Those two al-Qa’eda suspects on their way to Toronto.’

‘Small fry,’ Rawlins commented dismissively.

She rounded on him. ‘I’ll stake my job on Beesely any day of the week, Mister Rawlins.’

‘So would I!’ the SAS representative added.

‘As would I!’ the Police Commissioner’s representative added.

The P.M. raised a hand to silence them. ‘I am not sure we have the luxury of doubt at this juncture.’

The door opened and the P.M. was handed a note. He read it quickly. ‘Oh dear,’ he said as he finally looked up, a tinge of sarcasm in his voice. ‘American Ambassadors to most West European countries have been ordered out. The US State Department is warning of an imminent attack.’

‘Is the UK on that list?’ Dame Helen asked.

‘I’m afraid we are.’

Another note arrived. The P.M. read it quickly. ‘This is an official warning from the US State Department. Dirty bomb, central Europe, attack imminent.’ He turned to Rawlins. ‘It would seem that Mister Beesely is about ... an hour or so ahead of our American friends, when it comes to warning us about stuff like this.’ He waited, Rawlins shifting uneasily in his seat. The P.M. finally stated, ‘I guess we will go with our original plan. And panic.’

‘We need to check every vehicle coming across the channel,’ Dame Helen stated.

‘Agreed,’ the P.M. said. ‘What ... what sort of damage could a dirty bomb do?’

It was Rawlins who answered. Flatly he stated, 'It could make 'the square mile' - our financial centre - uninhabitable for a thousand years.'

'That *would* have an effect on the economy, I dare say,' the P.M. commented dryly, staring at Rawlins.

'This vehicle is said to contain radioactive ball bearings, thousands of them,' Dame Helen explained, diverting the PM's gaze. 'They could just drop them in the streets in every area of London. That would make *all* London uninhabitable, sir.'

'And the complete collapse of the economy of Western Europe,' the Home Secretary pointedly suggested. 'If this stuff is said to come from the Ukraine, maybe it began its journey in Russia. Maybe someone over there still wants to destroy NATO.'

'That idea cannot be ignored,' the P.M. agreed. He rubbed his forehead. 'OK. Cancel all ferries from the continent, turn back those that have not docked and handle the media.'

The Home Secretary pulled out his mobile and dialled.

'The channel tunnel, sir?' Dame Helen reminded him.

The P.M. reluctantly nodded. 'Let's start talking with our counterparts in France, Belgium, Holland. Yes?'

The Prime Minister lifted his face out a file as General Rose entered with Dame Helen. The Prime Minister eased back, studying General Rose as if an unwelcome visitor. 'Is there any link ... between this current threat... and other matters?' he unhappily enquired.

'Not yet,' General Rose admitted.

Helen glanced at him. 'And I'd be very surprised if there was,' she scoffed.

General Rose shrugged. 'I'd also be very surprised if our *European friends* employed such a tactic, it would hurt them as much as us.'

'Agreed,' Helen firmly stated, again glancing at General Rose.

The Prime Minister focused on the general, a slight frown. 'There was suggestion, by you, that this strange Swiss

organisation might be linked to our European problem. And yet ... here we sit, being tipped off by them.'

Helen stiffened. 'If there was anything underhand about K2 ...'

'K2?' the Prime Minister repeated.

'The Swiss intelligence organisation, Prime Minister. If there was anything underhand going on, Beesely would spot it.'

The Prime Minister faced General Rose. 'Anything further on that ... other matter?'

'No, sir.'

'And we have someone ... *inside* this K2?'

'Yes, Prime Minister.'

'And you, Helen?' the Prime Minister enquired. 'Someone ... inside?'

She stood proudly taller. 'Yes, Prime Minister. His name is Sir Morris Beesely, Victoria Cross.'

* * *

Herr Mole limped slowly from the castle, down into the East Camp and to the temporary rope barrier now erected around the decontamination room.

Many of the staff knew that Ricky had recently recruited the odd little Bavarian man, and that they had socialised together, both staying at the same boarding house. Out of respect for Ricky, and the knowledge that Mole had helped with the pursuit of Rudenson, they tolerated the little man.

Now Herr Mole stood next to a guard, the man towering over him. Short, bald and with bad eyesight, Herr Mole was not the typical K2 agent.

The guard lowered his head reverently. 'Sorry about Ricky,' he offered.

'We all are,' Mole answered. 'He was ... what is that English saying, a rough diamond?'

'Rough diamond. I like it, it fits.'

'With some luck I will find these men. And hopefully they will let *me* give them the chair.' He turned and limped slowly back towards the command centre, the guard watching him go.

Back inside Mole studied the camera image of the inside of the decontamination room. There lay Ricky's pale body, his left arm red up to the elbow and swollen, some red patches visible on the left side of his torso. His head faced the camera, lines of blood streaking down from his eyes and nose and pooling on the white tabletop.

Mole touched the screen. 'I will look after your child.'

2

Rain pelted the Bavarian petrol station forecourt. K2 agent Simon, a senior guard, waited for a break in the relentless rain, then just lowered his head and stepped out cursing.

He carefully supported three cups of steaming coffee in white plastic containers, the liquid's temperature starting to hurt his hands. With his head down against the rain he concentrated on not dropping the drinks. Glancing left he noticed a dark green car, the wiper blades moving. In slow motion he read the number plate.

The plastic coffee cups hit the ground and burst steaming hot coffee across the wet concrete as his hand reached inside his jacket, his heart pounding. He spun left and drew his weapon as a woman with a child ran quickly towards the covered area and protection from the rain. His pistol now rested in his hand. The woman stopped, screamed, grabbed her child by the head and jerked him violently backwards, the child's head just a few feet from the prone pistol.

Simon started towards the car, less than four metres away, the driver just visible through the moist windscreen. First round to the lower windscreen in the hope of breaking it. He saw the slide fly back and the cartridge eject in slow motion, a small puff of smoke. The glass shattered, now becoming white. Second and third shot where he figured the driver's chest would be as he ran forwards. Now a hole some six inches across. Fourth and fifth shot towards any passenger that might be sat there unseen, making a larger hole this time.

He reached the left side of the vehicle, smashing his left fist into the windscreen as he leant across the bonnet. It gave way and buckled. Peering inside he shoved his pistol right

through the hole and fired twice into the face of the passenger. Withdrawing his weapon he reached further across and shot twice into the top of the head of the driver, who was now slumped forwards.

His K2 companions were there a second later. The first man put four rounds quickly into the driver, four rounds quickly into the passenger.

‘Halt!’ Simon shouted as he edged sideways between the car and a camper van. He reached the boot and grabbed at its push button, fumbling to opening it. Blankets were covering something. He grabbed them, flinging them onto the wet ground, screams in the distance oddly muffled. He found a large metal case. ‘It is here!’

He rushed back to the front of the vehicle, holstering his weapon as his two companions remained prone, weapons pointed at the dead occupants. ‘We must evacuate this area!’

One guard grabbed his phone and called in the incident as the other two now produced false identities of the German Federal Police Service, the BKA. Heads down and squinting against the heavy rain they ran to nearby motorists, waving their badges and ordering the area cleared. One attended the kiosk window and shouted for the area to be evacuated.

A moment later a green and white police car pulled in to the petrol station, unaware of what was happening; they just needed fuel. An agent ran towards it through the rain, pistol in one hand, identity in the other.

The young policeman and his female companion were armed, as were most German officers, but still terrified by the gun-wielding man now running towards them. Gun crime remains uncommon in Germany, especially in Bavaria, but after events in recent weeks between neo-Nazi groups everyone remained on edge. They could see the identity badge and held their nerve, winding down a window as they slowed to a stop.

In perfect German the K2 agent shouted, ‘Evacuate this area. This vehicle is the one we have been looking for - it has radioactive metal in the rear!’ He thrust his Federal Police ID in their faces just long enough for them to see which

department he was; BKA, Wiesbaden. 'Quickly!' he shouted before turning and running back.

The female officer got on the radio a second later, screaming requests for backup.

* * *

Stepping out of a meeting, Pepi lifted his phone. 'Yes?'

'Sir, one of the cars has been stopped by the German security services.' Pepi closed his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. 'But, sir, I have checked with the BKA in Germany, a surprise to them as much as us. I believe the vehicle was stopped by K2 agents in Bavaria.'

'K2!' Pepi exploded.

'The second car has not been stopped, sir,' the voice offered. 'But the English, they have closed the Channel crossings, all of them.'

Pepi closed his flip-phone, closing his eyes for a moment before stepping back into the board meeting of this Pan-European construction company, its headquarters in Genoa, Italy.

3

Otto took the call as they sat on the tarmac at Aeroporto das Lajes, Azores. 'We found the car!' He listened as Beesely and John eased forwards in their seats. 'Killed the drivers. German police have the area sealed off.'

Beesely tapped Otto's leg, Otto lowering the phone. 'Make sure that it looks like the *German* security services found the car,' he whispered.

Otto listened a while longer then explained to operations what he wanted done.

When he lowered the phone Beesely asked, 'Have they checked radiation levels?'

Otto dialled again, taking several minutes to confirm that the German police had found low levels of radiation outside the box. They had not looked inside yet. Beesely dialled Dame Helen. She had been in a meeting with the Home Secretary

and others, but recognising the number, told them she had to take it.

‘Beesely?’ she whispered, stood now in a corridor.

‘Yes, have some good news for you, my dear. My boys just found and killed the drivers of the vehicle, in Bavaria. Germans are dealing with the radiation as we speak.’

‘Oh, thank God!’

‘Talk soon, I’ll be back in Zurich in about five hours.’ He hung up.

Dame Helen turned to find the Home Secretary behind her, an expectant look. ‘The Germans intercepted the vehicle in Bavaria. They are dealing with the radiation as we speak.’

The Home Secretary raised his hands then clasped them together. ‘Oh, well done,’ he let out. ‘C’mon, let’s go tell the P.M.’ They walked back to the COBRA meeting room where most of the members were still assembled, eating a late lunch that had been brought in for them.

Dame Helen’s smile caught the eye of many in the room. ‘The car has been stopped by the Germans,’ she announced with a beaming smile. Sedate cheers went up and people stood as the P.M. appeared in the doorway.

‘The Germans stopped the car!’ the Home Secretary enthused. ‘We’re in the clear.’

The P.M. smiled and shook hands with Dame Helen, then turned and addressed them all. ‘I would like to thank you all for your hard work today under these difficult conditions. We were lucky, and we had little help from our friends. I am cancelling this meeting, but I will be ordering a quick review of how we may have handled this type of crisis, should it have landed on our shores. I want all of you back here at a convenient time in the next few weeks with a view to ... not only reviewing our current procedures, but how we may improve them as well. Thank you all once again.’

Dame Helen quietly took him to one side. ‘It wasn’t the Germans who intercepted it.’

The PM raised his eyebrows. ‘Oh. I see. Contact the German Counter Terrorist Service - or whoever - and get all we can on that car, especially the drivers.’

A funeral to arrange

1

Johno peered out of the Gulfstream's window. 'Ricky wanted to be buried in Malvern,' he quietly mentioned.

Beesely turned his head as the jet climbed smoothly away from the beautiful small islands of the Azores. 'His family?' he delicately enquired.

Leaning back in his reclined chair Johno lazily turned his head. 'Sister. Father still alive. They live in Malvern somewhere. We spoke about it in Kosovo.'

'Going to be tricky, moving the body,' Beesely softly stated, staring out of focus. 'Even in a lead lined casket.'

Johno gave it some thought, adjusting the cold air vent above him. 'Can't cremate him,' he pointed out. 'Radioactive frigging ash blowing in the breeze.'

Beesely grimaced. 'We'll put him in concrete inside a lead lined casket and test it. If no radiation we'll ship him to the UK.'

Looking half asleep, Otto picked up his phone and got things moving.

Beesely rang AGN Security in London. 'Max?'

'Beesely, how you doing? Bloody panic over here, terrorist threat at highest level, talk of radioactive dirty bombs.'

'No need to worry, my boys bagged the bad guys a while ago.'

'*You* got them? Christ, you *are* up there in the big league. Probably get a bleeding peerage of some sort!' he laughed.

'Hardly. Listen, need to arrange a funeral for Ricky.'

Max paused. 'Ricky's dead?'

'Sorry, forgot you were not in the loop on that, it's been a bit hectic. Ricky was the first to spot the dirty bomb, got too close and died of radiation poisoning. And I want everyone in the game to know that - he died fighting for England!'

'Will do, Morris.'

'Find his family in Malvern, break the news as nicely as you can. Make sure all their financial needs are met and that

they are taken care of, very well taken care of. Let the boys in Hereford know that I want a large funeral.'

'No problem, we'll sort it. You coming?'

'Of course we're coming!'

'Sorry, Morris. Just thought it may be a bit ... you know - public - for you.'

'I don't care, we'll all be there. Let's aim for day after tomorrow. That will be a Friday, yes?'

'Yes. I'll make the arrangements.' Max hung up.

'He's Welsh,' Johnno muttered.

'What?' Beesely quietly asked.

'Ricky. Welsh, born in Swansea. Sister got married, moved to Malvern. When his father got sick he moved in with the sister, she divorced, so it was just the sister looking after the old man. He was from Latvia originally. Original name was Daulis, so changed it to Davies, which apparently was on a chip-shop sign when he landed at some place called Barry Docks by boat.'

'Who did?' Beesely puzzled.

'His dad. Came over as a kid during the war.'

Beesely nodded to himself, glancing out of the window.

* * *

Herr Mole limped slowly into the guards' barrack room, to be met with the sounds of a celebration going on. The large room overflowed with agents, many with drinks in hand, several managers present. He navigated through the crowd and up to a tall agent named Simon, the high-spirited group halting their celebration as he approached.

Mole put out a hand and they shook. 'Well done,' he offered, his features neutral and unreadable. 'Pity we could not have taken them alive.'

Simon agreed with a nod. 'Yes, but I was not about to take any chances of them driving off. The engine was running and they were looking directly at me.'

Others commended Simon's actions.

‘You ... are the experts, not me,’ Herr Mole stated. ‘Thanks once again.’ He walked slowly out, leaving Simon watching him go.

* * *

Johno, Thomas and Beesely were sound asleep as Otto grabbed Johno’s phone when it started to chirp. Bent double he moved forwards so as not to disturb them.

‘Hello,’ he whispered.

‘Johno? Is that you?’ came a female voice, a soft - and young - American accent.

‘No, Herr Johno is asleep –’

‘Asleep?’ she barked.

Now Otto remembered: the secret meeting with the twenty-one year old American glamour model that they were not supposed to know about. She must be waiting in the restaurant. ‘We are on his personal jet, heading back to Switzerland on urgent business. My apologies, ma’am.’

‘And who the hell are you ... exactly?’

‘I am the head of one of his banks.’

She paused. ‘Oh. So when’s he coming back to the Bahamas?’

‘Hard to say, ma’am, it’s an emergency. He has a meeting with the ... British Finance Minister in the morning,’ Otto lied.

‘Oh ... well ... tell him to call.’

‘May I request that you remain at the restaurant for another fifteen minutes, I believe he did organize a gift for you.’

‘Oh ... OK.’

Otto hung up, rubbed his eyes, then re-dialled to sort out a gift for her.

People were starting to stare at her. Men often did that, even when they were with their wives, their spouses none the wiser about their partner’s porn surfing. But now she waited in Nassau’s best seafood restaurant, alone and glancing at her watch.

Nine minutes later six violin players walked slowly in, starting to play whilst walking in step. Behind them came

twelve men carrying huge heart-shaped bouquets, each made up of an odd number of roses.

She smiled, even though everyone started staring – wives and all.

* * *

At the Swiss border the two Arabic men previously stopped by Ricky sat in their Ukraine-bought car, now with a different set of number plates. The rain had stopped, but the queue of cars and lorries crawled slower and slower and dusk came on. They stared at each other.

‘I think this is a roadblock,’ one commented.

They turned off along a side road. In the rear nestled a large metal case.

‘Oliver? Beesely here.’ He glanced out of the window at the night’s sky.

‘Ah, well done, old man!’

‘Thanks.’

‘Quite a coup. European leaders should be very happy with you.’

‘Finding the car strengthens our position somewhat. What happened to that 747 in the end?’

‘Should be landing at one of our military bases in Germany ... right about now,’ Oliver informed him.

‘Let’s not waste the opportunity, I’ll let the Europeans know how helpful you *may* have been. I’ll push the story my end, may do some good.’

‘Sure.’

‘I’ll get my people to run an unofficial story on what that 747 may or may not do,’ Beesely suggested.

‘Good of you,’ Oliver offered.

‘Take care. We should all get some peace now.’

Otto made eye contact. ‘Your room has not had its final test, we are expected at the Spa.’

Johno opened his eyes. ‘Where are we?’

‘Final descent into Zurich. We will be driven to the Spa.’

Johnno checked his watch, still on Bahamian time.

‘It is 1am local time,’ Otto informed them, Johnno and Beesely altering their watches. Thomas stirred.

2

Security remained tight the next morning as Beesely’s convoy drove through the compound and up to the castle. Noticing men in yellow hard-hats on the castle roof Johnno strained to see what they were doing.

Building work continued at a pace in the old restaurant, now fully decontaminated and tested a hundred times over. The concrete in the restaurant had been burnt, sanded down then burnt again, after which it had been painted with a plastic waterproof sealant, dried and then painted again with a special absorbent paint that the Israelis had sent over. Today it was due to be fitted out with carpets and furniture.

In response to any lingering threat from nerve agent the compound now housed permanent pens for a handful of piglets, adopted and fed by the staff. They were even named, ‘Johnno’ being a favourite. The castle’s air-conditioning had been modified and it now blew its warm exhaust air directly through a pen of some dozen or so happy pigs. Twice a day guards walked around the castle and its rooms with the best detectors money could buy. Beesely’s room was situated two floors under the restaurant and was unaffected; by coincidence, today would be the first day of re-occupying it, and the first day it would be ready.

The convoy stopped short of the castle at Johnno’s request. Beesely and family clambered out, stepping slowly towards the short-lived decontamination centre, now not only completely filled in with concrete, but covered with twelve inches of concrete on top; just a smooth grey oblong. They approached at a casual amble, Johnno at the head. He stopped and stood with his hands in his pockets, noticing the graffiti.

Thomas started to read some of the messages with a finger. ‘Rest in peace ... my friend,’ he slowly and carefully

pronounced in German, repeating it in English. Then he pointed at some words in English and turned to Johnno.

‘The same,’ Johnno informed him in German. He noticed the SAS ‘winged daggers’ drawn at several points close to the messages. Stepping forwards he placed a hand on the smooth concrete then faced Otto with a concerned frown. ‘Fucker’s not still inside, is he?’

‘No,’ Otto informed him, sounding tired. ‘His casket is in a small cave at the back of the camp.’

Johnno noticed the three SAS ‘old dogs’ walking down from the castle in camouflage clothing and so waved them over.

Kev began, ‘If Ricky was still alive I’d beat his arse around this camp. Putting his fucking hand in something like that!’

Johnno hugged him. They held each other’s forearms. ‘Not the smartest move.’

‘Aye, as fucking daft as you when it comes to getting ‘imself shot the fuck up!’

Johnno gave a reluctant nod. ‘Funeral tomorrow. Malvern.’

‘Aye, sister still alive. Dad was too, if I remember right.’

‘Be a big show, Max is organizing old members. Wake after.’

Kev straightened. ‘Shit, that should be interesting,’ he said, his expression suggesting trouble. ‘Be a few drunken words said in haste that night! Wee a few good punches as well.’

Johnno lifted his eyebrows and nodded in agreement as Beesely approached the group.

Kev let go of Johnno and shook Beesely’s hand. ‘Sorry for ya loss, sir.’

‘It is I who should be saying that to you,’ Beesely pointed out. ‘You knew him longest.’

‘Maybis ... maybis. We’ll ha’ a few good drinks at the wake.’

Beesely instructed, ‘Get your best bib and tucker sorted, we’ll be flying in the morning, couple of jets. Call anyone you need to in the UK that may want to be there.’

The ‘old dogs’ wandered off, chatting amongst themselves and making plans. As Beesely and the others approached the castle entrance a tall, suited stranger came out with a manager

and a guard. Noticing Beesely the man walked straight up to him with a broad smile.

‘Sir Beesely,’ he pronounced badly, shaking hands. ‘I am from Zohar Chemicals, the Israeli chemical company. We have installed the latest technology all over the castle and compound, both chemical and radiation detectors.’

‘That’s ... good to know, I shall sleep better.’

The man took it as a compliment, not the sarcasm it was meant as. ‘My boss has asked me to say to you that you have a lot of problems here, so we want to test our new systems here - beta site.’ He stood erect and smiled.

Beesely lowered his head, curled his lip, glanced at Otto then stormed off. Otto gave the man an unfriendly stare, following Beesely inside.

Johno walked up to the salesman, grabbed his brochure and said, ‘About as tactful as a fucking Israeli arms dealer!’

In the corridor to the command centre Beesely commented, ‘Annoying thing is ... he’s correct. In two weeks we’ve had our arses kicked twice.’

‘We are in the front line,’ Otto stated, repeating Beesely’s earlier statement.

In Beesely’s office they all slumped into chairs, Thomas off to his room for a sleep, his body-clock disrupted. Beesely dialled. ‘Get me Dame Helen, MI6.’

Muffled ringing could be heard. ‘Hello?’

‘Helen, Beesely here.’

‘Just got back? That was a long flight!’

‘Stayed the night at the nearby hotel Spa, but pretty tired. Body clock is all to hell.’

‘P.M. wished to express his thanks.’

‘Good to know. Listen, there’s a funeral tomorrow for my man Ricky, it’s in Malvern, between Gloucester and ... er ... Hereford, I think. Could do with a tight police presence, plus some discreet friends of yours hanging around, just in case.’

‘I’ll get on it. Anyone coming that we should be ... concerned about?’

‘Us lot, plus a load of old SAS troopers and some current.’

‘So, tight security then; sniffer-dogs, drains and hedgerows, helicopters?’ she suggested.

‘A bit ... excessive, just for little old me?’

‘Given what’s been happening ... no, I think I’ll play it safe.’

‘Very well, it’s your patch.’

‘Ricky was one of ours for six years –’ she quietly began.

‘And left to rot in a Chinese jail!’ Beesely firmly pointed out.

She paused. ‘Different management. Still, I think we should show our respects.’

Beesely took a breath. ‘You’re always welcome. Contact Max at AGN Security for the details.’

‘I know Max quite well, so I’ll co-ordinate the whole thing. Ricky worked for our gang for quite a while, so if I find anyone that knew him ... then I’ll let them know.’

‘Very well. Bye.’ He hung up and eased back, clearly fatigued. Turning to Otto he said, ‘Can we get those black suits dusted off? Again! Extra planes for those staff here who may wish to attend. I would suggest just the English contingent, plus anyone who knew him well - such as his line manager here.’

Otto offered a professional Swiss head-tip.

Johno suggested, ‘I guess that little guy, Hairy Mole, would want to come.’

‘I saw him outside,’ Otto informed them.

Beesely dialled and requested his presence, Herr Mole appearing in the doorway a minute later. He looked exactly as Johno had described, the anti-hero if ever there was one. Beesely stood as Mole entered. ‘Come in. We were just discussing Ricky’s funeral. It’s tomorrow, in England, if you want to go.’

‘Thank you, sir, but there is something in the town I have to do for Ricky.’

Otto and Johno glanced at each other then swivelled around.

Puzzled, Beesely asked, ‘For Ricky?’

Herr Mole stepped closer. ‘I suppose it is of no matter now. Herr Ricky has a woman in the town ... and she is four months

pregnant. I have been looking after her since his death. And before. She is the owner of the boarding house.'

Otto seemed shocked. 'I did not know this!'

Herr Mole shrugged. 'He was a secret agent.'

'The best,' Johno offered, a wry smile forming.

'Why ... did you not tell us?' Beesely calmly, but firmly demanded.

'He asked me, very firmly, to keep it quiet. I saw no security risk or breach of confidence.'

'Bring her here,' Beesely insisted. 'Straight away. She will be looked after.'

'No, sir.'

'No?' Beesely repeated in disbelief as Otto stood. 'You said ... no?'

'Herr Ricky *insisted* that she and the child were to have nothing to do with K2. Ever.'

Otto stepped closer and stared sternly down at him. Herr Mole clasped his hands behind his back and cranked his head up, fixing Otto defiantly with a stare through his thick lenses. After two seconds Otto turned to Beesely, unsure of what to do.

Beesely sat, letting out an audible sigh. 'If it was Ricky's wish ... then we will honour that wish. He had his reasons and, quite frankly, to quote our friend from Israel, we do have a lot of problems here. Probably safer if the kid was outside.'

'Ain't that the truth,' Johno mumbled.

Beesely gave him an unfriendly glare, then turned to Otto. 'Give Herr Mole Ricky's wages to give to her. If anyone tries to find this woman and child they will answer to me. Clear?'

Otto finally lowered his head and relaxed, slumping into his chair.

'Thank you, Herr Beesely,' Mole offered, and left.

'He's got balls,' Johno remarked.

'Yes,' Beesely agreed. 'I can see why Ricky liked him.'

Johno held up the Israeli salesman's brochure. 'Who'd want to bring a kid near us fuckers? This ain't the brochure for Pampers!'

Beesely turned to Otto. 'I think we need to increase our budget on security equipment. And on our *offensive* capability.'

3

The Chief Constable of Worcestershire took the call just as he was about to leave his office. He was already running late. 'What?' he gasped. 'Tomorrow?' He listened. 'Yes ... yes, Ma'am ... we will do, Ma'am.' He put the phone down. 'Jesus!'

'Who was that?' his deputy asked.

'The head of MI6 herself!'

It started ringing again. 'Hello? Who? The Junior Defence Minister? Yes, put him through.'

The other phone in the room began to ring, answered by his deputy. He held it to his chest, a hand over the mouthpiece.

'Who's that?' the chief constable whispered.

'Someone from the SAS,' came the concerned reply.

The Chief Constable listened intently to the Junior Defence Minister. Ten minutes later every available officer was on the phone, calling colleagues and ordering them in at 5am. Officers from Gloucester and Hereford were requested, asking those forces to spare one or two firearms teams plus sniffer dogs.

* * *

Kempsey & Alfrick police station was not manned at night and Inspector Clive Crosswel was just about to go off duty when three uniformed, and armed, SAS troopers wandered in. His mind leapt between the reasonable knowledge that they might be armed officers ... and that they might be terrorists. He just stared, open-mouthed.

'Evening, Boss,' the first man said. 'SAS. Specially Annoying Service tonight, I'm afraid.'

'How ... er ... can I help you gentlemen.'

'Big funeral in the morning just up the road, ex-SAS guy. We're part of the advance team, going to be poking around all

night, so we're going to need you to stay here tonight, plod. This is temporary command central, I'm afraid.'

'Plod?' the officer quietly repeated.

'Get the fucking kettle on, mate,' came from the rear.

Two more men walked in, this time in suits. The first man pushed to the front then looked the SAS trooper up and down. 'Hope you wiped your fucking boots!' He produced his ID; they were from MI6.

The first trooper had a good look at the ID. 'What you doing here then, Boss?'

'Funeral tomorrow. Loads of VIPs, probably director of MI6, plus a few politicians. Heard your boss is putting in an appearance.'

The trooper did not know. 'Really?' He faced the other troopers. 'Shit, be under the microscope, boys.'

'Some people flying in from all over.' The MI6 officer turned to the Inspector. 'Is there a room we can use?'

The Inspector held up his hands. 'Look, I have to call the Chief Constable's office first -'

The phone nearest began to ring. The man from MI6 pointed at it. 'Bet you ten quid that's him.'

The lead SAS trooper said, 'Twenty says it's plod's wife, wondering where he is.' They shook.

The Inspector answered the call. 'Hello? Yes, sir.'

'Fuck!' the trooper cursed, handing over a note.

The MI6 officer smirked. 'Stick to the muddy field, eh, pongo.'

* * *

'It's who?' the Queen enquired.

'Dame Helen Eddington-Small, Director of MI6, Ma'am,' her houseman informed her.

The Queen was surprised, glancing at her watch. 'I'll take the call in my study.'

'Very good, Ma'am.'

The Queen listened at length to Dame Helen. Finally she said, 'I'm grateful that you have brought this to my attention. Leave it to me. Good night.'

Dawn started to break over the cemetery as two of West Mercia's armed response teams pulled up in their Volvos, parking on the grass at the entrance to the cemetery. A local patrol car was already in attendance, the two local officers easing out as the others arrived. Judging by their slow egress and cat-like stretching the new arrivals figured their colleagues had been there all night.

'You look like shit,' the first armed officer offered.

'Thanks. Feel like it as well,' came back.

'Been here all night?'

'Night's not over for most sane people, home with the wife, all nice and toasty. Today's a rest day, was supposed to be taking the missus shopping down in Cardiff.'

'Bet ya glad you're here then!'

They laughed. The new arrivals geared up, heading inside to start their sweep.

'Graveyards at dawn,' one complained. 'Perfect.'

They made their way, deliberately slowly, up the main cemetery road, a gentle incline and shaded on one side by tall trees. After a hundred yards they noticed an army Land Rover.

'What's that?'

They glanced at each other then walked on, checking the area carefully. Slowly stepping up to the open driver's window of the Army Land Rover they noticed what appeared to be steam coming out. They drew level.

'Morning,' a soldier called, watching them through the vehicle's mirror. 'Show on already?' He downed warm tea straight from the flask.

'You probably know more than we do,' the officer complained. 'We don't know what the fuck we're supposed to be doing here, just got pulled off our normal duties.'

'Could be worse, could've been here all night.' The soldier put a finger to his lips, giving a '*shhhh*', before pointing to the rear of the vehicle. Whispering he said, 'They get grumpy if woken an hour too soon. Command vehicle up the road.'

The officers walked slowly on. A light mist hung over the graves, a few birds already calling, shiny dew twinkling off the gravestones and the grass. At the far end of the cemetery, some fifty yards further up the gentle incline, they came across several Land Rovers parked up on a patch of grass, a large green tent erected, but no soldiers visible.

They halted. 'Hello?'

'Shhhhhh,' came from above them.

They glanced up and around, taking many seconds to locate a camouflaged soldier in a tree. 'Morning,' one quietly offered. 'That looks uncomfortable.'

'That's because it is, flatfoot. Boss is in the tent, probably asleep with his teddy.'

'Boss ... is awake, now,' the Captain stated as he stretched. He stepped over and held out a hand to shake. 'Cavalry here already?'

'We've only seen one other patrol car so far, two of ours on the way. We're supposed to have this place checked by 7am, then the dogs get here.'

The Captain checked his watch. 'Not to worry, nothing moves around here unless *we* let it. Do what you need to, go through the motions, then handle the road - we've got snipers all over the perimeter. Best stay out of the woods and the edges of the cemetery, we don't want to shoot you now, do we?'

'Nice to know,' one officer quipped. 'And we won't give you a ticket for parking in a fucking cemetery!'

The Captain laughed as the officers turned. They ambled back to the main entrance, arriving just as a small lorry pulled up.

'Marquee,' the driver shouted. 'Where's it going?'

'God knows,' the first officer replied before turning and studying the cemetery. There seemed only one place it could go, a neatly mown field off to the side, through a small gate. He pointed. 'Over there,' he suggested, walking around to open the gate as the lorry navigated around the main entrance and into the field.

A mobile burger van pulled up on the opposite side of the road.

‘Oh, there is a God,’ an officer mumbled.

Five minutes later the sniper in the tree shouted down. ‘Boss, you there?’

The Captain emerged from the tent, shouting up an unfriendly, ‘What?’

‘Plod’s got themselves a burger van on the main road!’

‘Really?’ The officer perked up. SAS troopers started to appear from nowhere like magic. He reached into his pocket and produced thirty pounds. ‘Blinky, Dave, get a dozen burgers. And don’t take no crap from plod. Oh, and bring me back a receipt. Signed!’

The troopers glanced at each other then set off.

From the western edge of the cemetery two men in civilian clothes appeared, flanked by camouflaged troopers. The Captain noticed them then clicked his fingers. ‘Get back on the clock, boys.’

Weapons were cocked, faces turned to stone. The ‘prisoners’ approached, two stocky men in their fifties with weather-worn faces.

The Captain stood with his hands on his hips. ‘What we got here then?’

‘Tubby Jones,’ the first man announced. ‘And this Wilko.’

‘Well, with names like you’d have to be old boys.’ He shook their hands.

‘We both served with Ricky for a few years, back in the eighties, *and* lived to tell the tale. Then we ran ops with him for private agencies for a good few years.’

The Captain frowned. ‘Wilko? Wilko Thomas?’

The man smiled and nodded, he and his *oppo* producing their old ID cards. ‘Warrant Officer Scottish Kev gave us a call last night.’

‘Ah, now there’s a name I know. He’ll be here?’

‘Yeah, works for old man Beesely now,’ Wilko explained.

‘Beesely? Sir Morris Beesely?’ the Captain puzzled. ‘Wasn’t he Regiment, back in the fifties or something?’

‘Guards officer originally, then Regiment. Got decorated in Korea,’ Wilko explained.

The Captain added, ‘There’s a photo of him getting the Victoria Cross on the wall of the Officers’ Mess.’

‘Wouldn’t know, never went near the bleeding Officer’s Mess. We worked for a living!’

The Captain laughed. ‘So ... what’s Beesely doing these days? He must be getting on a bit.’

‘You’ll see later today. Old man Beesely will be the one that everyone else bows their heads to - your boss, head of military intelligence, the fucking Prime Minister.’ The Captain’s eyes widened. ‘Can’t say any more than that, Beesely’s people have ears everywhere.’

‘There’s a burger van down the road if you want something,’ the Captain offered.

‘No, we’re off to scrub up and then come back, show kicks off at 11am. I don’t live far and I know Ricky’s father, so we’ll drive them in.’

Wilko had started to walk off when he suddenly stopped and turned. In a loud voice he addressed them all. ‘Do you know how Ricky died?’ It had not been meant as a question. ‘You know that car they stopped in Germany, with the radioactive dirty bomb in the back? Well, it wasn’t the Germans who stopped it, it was Ricky - and it cost him his life. He’s coming here today in a lead lined casket full of concrete. He died a hero, and don’t you young fuckers forget that!’

The Captain lowered his head.

A dangerous place to be buried

1

Quite a convoy had assembled in front of the castle, the security oppressive with two-dozen guards encircling the vehicles. The SAS 'old dogs' stood in a line, five of them now, plus four younger ex-troopers - the 'wet-work' team. All wore black suits and stood chatting quietly as they waited. Alongside them stood Ricky's Swiss line manager and two K2 agents who had been part of his team.

Beesely walked briskly out with Otto and Johnno in tow, a sleepy Thomas bringing up the rear with a guard gently nudging him onwards. Beesely stopped in the centre of the vehicles and reviewed the scene. 'Gentlemen, are we all here and ready?'

Managers glanced around and checked the faces, nodding and indicating that all was in order.

'Let's go,' Beesely ordered.

* * *

Staverton Airport, Gloucestershire, was never busy at the best of times; a few private light aircraft coming and going, the odd flight to the Channel Islands or the Isle of Man, the occasional businessman flying to London Docklands. So two-dozen armed police officers walking into the small dual-purpose arrivals/departures lounge became quite the event of the year. The airport's manager was soon on his way, hurriedly rushing across the airfield to meet the officers. Out of breath he jogged in to find more machineguns than he had ever seen, or ever wanted to see at his rural airfield.

An officer in a suit held up his ID: Special Branch. 'You are?'

'Brooks, the airport manager,' he panted. 'What's going on?'

'VIPs flying in, landing in an hour, two private Learjets.'

'I hadn't been told anything -'

‘That’s why they call it security. It’s *secure* information.’

‘Does air traffic control know?’ Brooks delicately enquired.

‘They’ve just been informed,’ came the curt reply.

‘Oh.’ Brooks took a breath. ‘Does their arrival clash with any local traffic?’ he nervously enquired, picturing in his mind the Learjets coming in to land as a local Cessna 172 lined up to take-off.

‘Tough shit if it does.’ The Special Branch officer took Brooks by the arm to his office, the other officers fanning out, setting up roadblocks and sweeping the area.

* * *

Beesely glanced out of the Learjet’s window, down at the River Severn and the Second Severn Crossing, its cables a bright blue-white colour contrasting with the brown mud underneath it.

‘Five minutes,’ the pilot informed them over the tannoy.

The Learjet bustled. Full to capacity, it now carried eight passengers, no room for any guards; security on this trip was strictly down to British Special Branch. Beesely woke up John and Thomas in turn. Otto had been reading a file, but now glanced out of the window and put away his paperwork.

‘Let’s look sharp, gentlemen,’ Beesely instructed. The troopers started to adjust ties and suits and check each other.

Away from the terminal a convoy of Range Rovers waited, all with Special Branch drivers, plus a uniformed local officer sat in the front of each. Four patrol cars surrounded them, two at the head of the convoy, two at the rear.

Beesely stepped down first, followed by ‘the family’, finally the troopers. The lead Special Branch detective welcomed him and shook hands, leading them towards the convoy.

Malvern proved to be just a fifteen-minute drive up the M5 motorway, followed by slow side roads to the cemetery. The last two hundred yards were a disturbingly slow crawl, Beesely noting hundreds of mourners.

‘You told Max to make a show of it,’ Johno pointed out when he noticed Beesely’s concern.

‘I know, I know,’ Beesely said as he took out his phone. ‘Get me Duncan.’ They waited.

‘Duncan here.’

‘It’s Beesely. Listen, look out today and tomorrow for any stories and pictures from a funeral in Malvern -’

‘It’s already on the wire.’

‘Then I want to know exactly what is said, any pictures or mention of me then jump on them, hard. Any stories about the death of a former SAS trooper then ... then fine. But any mention of radiation and try and kill it. Understand?’

‘Yeah, leave it to me.’ He hung up.

‘We should have sun-glasses, maybe,’ Otto suggested, glancing at the crowd.

Beesely rolled his eyes. ‘Then we *would* look suspicious!’ He took a breath. ‘Oh, well.’

The convoy crept slowly into the cemetery, turning hard left and into the field with the marquee, carefully navigating through the crowds before finally parking on the grass against a stone wall. They stepped down and joined the crowd around the marquee, two Special Branch officers flanking Beesely.

Johno’s name got called immediately by a handful of former troopers. He waved and walked over to them.

Beesely checked his watch; they had thirty minutes before the service and burial started. Concerned, he glanced around the field, holding Thomas by the shoulder. ‘Stay close,’ he said in German, leading the boy into the marquee, the only thing on his mind being Max and the family.

Max emerged from a loud group of men, noticed Beesely and walked briskly over. He shook Beesely’s hand. ‘Anything you need, Boss?’

‘Where’s the family?’

‘I saw them outside a minute ago.’ Max grabbed one of his staff and sent the man to look for them.

The inside of the marquee was quite the party already, a mixture of uniformed soldiers wearing best No. 1s, soldiers in fatigues with machineguns slung over their shoulders, men in black suits, some in casual dress, uniformed police officers,

strange groups of twos or threes of serious looking men huddled in corners.

Dame Helen walked in with the Junior Defence Secretary, plus Colonel Milward from the SAS flanked by two armed troopers. The two groups immediately closed the gap and greeted each other.

Beesely smiled formally. 'Dame Helen, surprised to see you here today, but you are always welcome.' They shook.

'Sir Morris, may I introduce the Junior Defence Secretary.' They shook. 'And I believe you know Colonel Milward.'

'Yes,' Beesely confirmed as they shook. 'Hello again, it's been a while.'

Milward informed them all, 'My first tour with the Regiment ... when I was a Captain. You were with our Military Intelligence liaison group in Northern Ireland.'

'Well, let's not have a history lesson, it will make me look old!' They laughed.

The Junior Defence Secretary inched forwards. 'The P.M. wishes to offer his condolences for your loss, and to thank you for ... *recent assistance*.'

'Good of him.'

'I hope you don't mind,' Dame Helen began, 'but we have arranged a posthumous award for Sergeant Davies. Rush job.'

Beesely straightened, a little surprised. 'Always appreciated. I am sure his family will be pleased.'

A police officer brought in an elderly man in a wheelchair, accompanied by Max and a woman dressed in black, Ricky's sister Beesely presumed. Beesely gestured Dame Helen towards them. Ricky's father and sister seemed completely overwhelmed and not handling the attention well. The crowd parted and they were presented to Beesely.

'Mr. Davies, I'm Sir Morris Beesely. Your son was working for me when he ... died.' He swivelled his upper body and gestured with an open hand. 'This is Dame Helen, the head of our Intelligence Services. This is the Junior Defence Minister and this is Colonel Milward, Commandant of the SAS.'

‘Max told us about you, Mister Beesely,’ Ricky’s father managed to get out between sobbing and coughing. ‘He bought us a new house, a car ...’ He could not continue.

‘Your son was a hero,’ Dame Helen offered as she knelt in front of him, keenly observed by Beesely. ‘He died fighting for his country and we have a medal for him that we would like to give to you.’ She stood and signalled Milward by tipping her head.

Milward turned and shouted, ‘Men of the Regiment. If you please!’ The marquee fell silent, men stepping in from outside. ‘Make some space!’ Milward shouted, gesturing for people to move to the sides of the tent.

Soldiers moved back and stood in silence, holding their drinks. Johno appeared with a group of former troopers and stood to one side.

Milward made eye contact with a man, who stepped out, reappearing a moment later with a large photo in a frame. ‘We managed to find an old photo of Sergeant Davies in uniform.’ He displayed the photo for all to see, then handed it over to Ricky’s father.

‘He looks young there,’ Ricky’s father noted.

Milward gave a quick head-tip to the same man, who disappeared out of the tent. In walked a man in a formal morning suit and bowler hat. He took off the hat and walked to the middle of the room.

‘Mr. Davies,’ the newcomer called, bowing his head. Quietly he began, ‘Her Majesty the Queen has asked me to attend here today. After consultation between the Army, the Queen’s Office and Her Majesty’s Government, it has been decided to formally award your son a posthumous Distinguished Service Medal.’ Whispers shot around the room. Beesely smiled, nodding. The Queen’s agent produced a thin, dark blue box from an inside pocket, opened it to show people then handed it over.

Beesely began clapping, soon followed by those who could clap - without drinks in their hands. A few cheers went up.

The Queen’s agent walked up to Beesely as former soldiers closed in on Ricky’s family. ‘Her Majesty wishes to convey

her deepest sympathies for your loss, and her gratitude for your continuing loyalty to your country.'

Beesely shook the man's hand then turned to Dame Helen. 'Nice gesture for Ricky,' he said as they were both brought champagne flutes. 'You broke a few rules with the speed of that award. Still, twelve years late is better than nothing.'

Dame Helen responded, 'You're taking care of the family, so least we could do.'

Ten minutes later a police officer whispered in Beesely's ear that the casket had arrived.

'Casket is here,' Beesely informed Milward as he checked his watch.

'Do you need a burial detail?'

Beesely explained, 'It weighs a tonne. Literally! Lead lined and full of concrete. The handles would probably break off if we could get enough men next to it. No, we have a forklift arranged.'

Milward stared, wide eyed. 'Forklift?'

'Can't be helped. If you can get everyone to line the road...'

Milward turned and started requesting groups to down drinks and line the roadway, the vicar appearing and joining the family.

2

Herr Mole was sat eating in the staff canteen when the German regional news came on, the news from his home district in Bavaria. He glanced up as someone increased the volume.

It was a continuation of the story about the radioactive metal case, which they had all watched several times over the night before. Now there seemed to be some fresh items of discussion. He watched the image of a man in a protective suit carrying the large metal box from the car and into the back of another vehicle. Mole was about to sip his coffee when he slowly lowered it. Turning back to the TV images he frowned. 'Something is not right,' he mumbled.

The person sitting opposite heard him, glancing at the TV screen as Herr Mole stood and walked back towards the control room. There he ordered up the report of the encounter in Hungary and started to read, making notes. His manager noticed him and, in passing, enquired what he now worked on.

‘I will need your help and some staff,’ Herr Mole cheekily informed his manager without detracting from his studies. ‘There is a problem with the box we stopped in Bavaria.’

‘A problem with it?’

‘Yes. Can you please find out for me if the German authorities emptied the metal case of ball bearings before they removed it?’

‘Emptied the case? Of course not! Who would open that box and remove the ball bearings with that level of radiation? They would have to be crazy to attempt it.’

Mole looked up. ‘Then we have a very serious problem. Can you call the German authorities and double check, then get me a metal box of these dimensions.’ He handed up a piece of paper. ‘Plus several thousand small metal ball bearings.’

‘What are you suggesting?’

‘I am suggesting ... that if I am right, that we have a very big problem. That metal case may not be the right one.’

‘What?’ his manager gasped. He turned to other staff, starting to issue orders before dialling a senior official of the German Federal Police, the man a K2 operative himself.

Herr Mole made sure no one was watching then sent an email ordering the two K2 helicopters on stand-by in the UK to the funeral to pick up Beesely – in exactly thirty minutes; they had been waiting discreetly at Shobdon Aerodrome, Herefordshire.

Mole studied the replica metal box, checking the details on the paper in his hands. ‘The box is roughly of the correct dimensions, and so are the ball bearings. Ricky put his arm in, up to the elbow.’ He signalled Simon the guard, who stood ready with a sleeve rolled up. The man worked his hand down through the ball bearings until he touched the bottom.

‘Stop,’ Mole requested. ‘Notice where the ball bearings reach his elbow.’ He turned to the doctor. ‘Doctor, would you

say that the radiation burn pattern on Ricky's arm would have been caused in this way?

'Yes,' the doctor confidently confirmed as others looked on.

'And the Germans did not remove the ball bearings?' Mole asked. His manager confirmed that the German authorities had just tested the box before removing it. 'Simon, would you please close the lid of the box and then lift it up,' Mole requested, standing back a step.

Simon rolled down his sleeve, closed the lid, braced himself and then tried to lift the box off the table. He couldn't. At best he could move it sideways. And Simon was six foot five and eighteen stone.

The senior manager stepped forwards, looking horrified. 'The box in Bavaria, it did not have the ball bearings inside!' He turned to Mole. 'So where are they?'

Calmly, Mole responded, 'It is not the same box. The ball bearings are in another box, being assembled into the dirty bomb that they were always intended for. The captured box was never part of the plan, but maybe a decoy.'

The senior manager's eye bulged. 'ALARM!'

3

The forklift crept forwards in loud, jerky movements, eliciting strange looks from the crowd lining the cemetery road. Some soldiers stood with drinks in hand, making rude comments about the unusual burial method.

Behind the forklift's laboured progress came the local vicar, followed closely by Ricky's father and sister, the wheelchair pushed by Johnno. Behind them trailed the others, finally Milward and his honour guard of twelve uniformed troopers.

Today offered to be a pleasant July day, warm, but no sign of the sun breaking through the clouds yet. As the tail of the honour guard inched along bystanders 'fell-in' and followed on from behind.

* * *

Herr Mole found the phone number he had been searching for in the computer. THE LODGE: ACCESS BY BEESELY ONLY. With the chaos of the control room behind him he dialled the number.

‘Hello?’ came an American accent.

‘My name is Herr Mole, I work for Sir Morris Beesely at K2, Switzerland.’

‘One moment please.’ Mole waited.

‘This is Oliver Stanton.’

‘My name is Herr Mole, I work for Sir Morris Beesely at K2.’

‘Where’s Beesely?’

‘At a funeral in England.’

‘Ah, yes. How can I help, exactly?’

‘The dirty bomb that we - the Germans - found, it was a decoy –’

‘Decoy! Are you sure?’

‘Yes, sir. There were only a handful of ball bearings in it.’

‘So where are the rest?’

‘We have no idea, sir,’ Mole informed him.

‘Jesus!’

‘I was wondering if that 747 you kindly offered before was still available?’

‘Wait on the line.’ Mole waited a full two minutes. ‘You there?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘It’s on its way here, over Ireland by now.’

‘Can you turn it around, sir?’

‘I’m trying to reach it now. Where would you like it sent?’

‘I would suggest a high altitude search of Southern England and London to start with.’

‘Leave it with me.’

A long wake

1

Beesely's, Johnno's and Otto's phones began to vibrate and bleep at the same time, the signal for a security alert.

Beesely turned to Milward. 'We've got company!'

Johnno began glancing over the heads of onlookers to see if he could see anything wrong. Soldiers copied him.

Milward ordered the honour guard forwards to protect the VIPs before shouting, 'Men of the Regiment, heads up! We've got trouble.' Men started to run and cock their weapons. The police at the gate jumped out of their vehicles, making ready their weapons.

Beesely answered his phone then listened. 'What?' He hung up then turned to face Dame Helen. 'That metal case the Germans found, it was emptied of its ball bearings. It was a decoy. They are still out there somewhere!'

Dame Helen grabbed her mobile as they started to work their way through the crowd to the gate.

Noticing the 'old dogs' Beesely pointed back towards the forklift. 'Look after the family!'

Milward shouted, 'Serving men of the Regiment, back to base! On the double!'

Dame Helen shouted down her phone, 'That first dirty bomb was a decoy, there's another one! It could be anywhere! It could be here!'

It took a full ten minutes to get to the road through the crowd, sirens wailing as fresh police arrived.

Beesely grabbed a senior officer. 'We're going to need a fast escort back to the airport!'

They headed for the line of Range Rovers, before Otto stopped them. With his phone still to his ear he stated, 'Our helicopters will be here soon.'

'How soon?' Beesely asked.

'Two minutes,' Otto informed him with a puzzled expression. 'They were activated thirty minutes ago.'

‘Who activated them?’ Beesely asked, studying Otto’s expression.

‘I do not know,’ Otto admitted.

They stared at each other before recognising the sound of helicopters in the distance. A few seconds later two black Squirrel helicopters circled the area at high speed and low altitude before putting down in the field the other side of the road to the cemetery. Unfortunately for everyone the hay in the fields had just been harvested.

Beesely sought out Dame Helen in the chaos. ‘Helen! You and the Minister take one, we’ll take the other!’

They scrambled across the road, across a ditch and into the field. Running bent double they clambered in, Johnno getting into the co-pilot’s seat. Both helicopters took off immediately and sped off at low altitude.

‘Pilot, Staverton airport,’ Otto ordered.

Beesely adjusted his headset. ‘Pilot, head for London, best speed. And pilot, can I connect with operations on this headset?’

‘Yes, sir. One moment. OK, go ahead.’

‘This is Beesely.’

‘Operations here, sir,’ came a detached and professional female voice.

‘Give me an update.’

‘We have determined that the box stopped in Bavaria is not the one that Herr Ricky put his arm into, there were not enough ball bearings in it, sir.’

‘OK, alert all European security agencies.’

‘Already done, sir.’

‘Excellent. Right, put me through to Oliver Stanton at The Lodge.’

‘One moment, sir. It may not be a good line ... standby ... go ahead both parties.’

‘Olly, that you?’ Beesely shouted

‘Beesely, yes, where the heck are you?’ came the crackling reply.

‘In a helicopter, heading for London.’

‘We got the 747 turned around as you requested –’

‘What do you mean, we requested?’ Beesely asked, confused.

‘Your people called me, asked for the 747. It was over the Atlantic heading home, now it should be over Cornwall.’

‘Who called you from K2?’ Beesely pressed.

‘Some guy named Mole. Twenty minutes ago.’

Beesely made eye contact with Otto. ‘Oh, OK. I would suggest that they climb to altitude and make a general sweep of Southern England and then London.’

‘That’s what it’s doing, as your people requested.’

Again Beesely made eye contact with Otto.

Johno laughed. ‘Ricky picked a winner, Boss.’

‘Listen, Olly, can you get me the 747 comms’ frequency?’

‘Got it here –’

‘Don’t tell me, my people already asked for it?’

‘Yep, it’s 302.1.’

‘Call you later. Operations? End call. Pilot, can you access 302.1?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Make contact with them.’

‘Their call sign, sir?’

‘Try ... 747 Radiation Bird,’ Johno suggested.

‘And who do we tell them we are, sir?’ the pilot asked.

‘British Military Intelligence,’ Beesely suggested.

‘747 Radiation Bird, this is British Military Intelligence, do you copy?’

‘British Intelligence, this Mike Whiskey One-Niner,’ came back in a calm and soft American accent.

‘Mike Whiskey One-Niner, this is Kilo-Two. What is your altitude, bearing and position, over?’ the pilot asked.

‘Kilo Two, we are level four-zero, bearing zero-eight-seven, just started scanning Cornwall.’

‘Mike Whiskey, this is commandant aboard Kilo-Two,’ Beesely began. ‘Please concentrate on London and the area between London and south coast, over.’

‘Kilo-Two, roger. We are nine minutes from London, over.’

Beesely tapped the pilot's shoulder and made a throat cutting sign. The pilot gave a thumbs-up. 'Pilot, how long to London?'

'Thirty five minutes, sir. Normally'

'Break every speed limit and restriction, just get us there. Put operations on.'

'Operations, sir.'

'Put me through to Dame Helen.'

'I can do that directly, sir,' the pilot interrupted. 'Helo to helo.'

'Fine, do it.'

'Kilo-Bravo, come in, over.'

'Kilo-Bravo here, half a mile on your six.'

Johno stared out of the window, twisting his head around as he scanned for the other K2 helicopter.

'This is Beesely, give me Dame Helen.'

'Beesely, Helen here, go ahead.'

'Helen, there's an American military 747 ten minutes away from London. It's kitted out with radiation detectors specifically designed for this sort of job. If there is a dirty-bomb in the UK we'll find it.'

'Beesely, just how the hell did *you* get the Americans to send us that? And how come *we* didn't know about it?'

'I have friends in high places, my dear - forty thousand feet, to be exact. That 747 was on its way home after we tried to use it the first time, so we turned it around. It can pinpoint that bomb. I'm going to fly this helicopter to wherever it is, hover above it, you can track us.'

'OK, will do. We managed to get through to the PM, he's being flown out to Chequers and we're heading there.'

'Good luck, Helen. We'll relay what we find, stay on this frequency.'

2

The two helicopters flew on across the pleasant Gloucestershire countryside, towards Oxford.

Five minutes later Beesely's helicopter was contacted by the USAF 747. 'Kilo-Two, this is Mike Whiskey One Niner. Copy, over?'

The pilot responded, 'Mike Whiskey, this is Kilo-Two. Go ahead, over.'

'Kilo-Two, we have an unusual signal. It's coming from Kentshire.'

'Kent-*shire*?' Johnno repeated, turning to the pilot with an amused frown.

'Mike-Whiskey, this is Kilo-Two commandant. Is the target moving?'

'Kilo-Two, affirmative. Tracking slowly north west, less than twenty miles from central London.'

'Mike-Whiskey, descend and pinpoint the target, we will clear it with air traffic control. You fly where you need to, forget the rest of the traffic. Understood?'

'Kilo-Two, understood. What's your transponder code? We'll track you, over.' The K2 pilot gave the 747 crew his transponder code.

'Pilot!' Johnno called. He pointed ahead with a broad smile. 'Kent-*shire*!'

Pleasant countryside and small towns shot by in a blur.

Beesely tapped the pilot's shoulder. 'Dame Helen.'

'Kilo-Bravo, come in.'

'Kilo-Bravo here, go ahead.'

'Helen, it's in Kent. Or, as our American friends just reported, Kent-*shire*. Get air traffic control to clear a path for that 747, call sign Mike Whiskey One-Niner. Then I suggest you close all the roads south of London!'

'Will do.'

He tapped the pilot's shoulder as they sped across brown and dry fields. 'Fly directly towards Kent. Try and picture that position, then cut straight across London, screw the regulations. Understand!'

'Yes, sir.'

Beesely took a breath and turned to Thomas. He forced a smile, but did not need to worry about the boy, who was loving the helicopter ride, sat in his oversized headset. Beesely addressed Otto, 'That car is twenty minutes from the centre of London. The one good thing being British traffic and crappy Kent roads! So maybe an hour.'

‘If Herr Mole had not broken protocols it would be too late,’ Otto pointed out, looking disappointed.

‘Going to buy that fucker a big drink when we get back,’ Johnno stated from up front.

‘He certainly shows initiative,’ Beesely commended.

‘Sir, we are being followed by a police helicopter,’ the pilot informed them.

‘Does it have a flashing blue light?’ Johnno quipped, straining to see it.

Beesely reminded them, ‘They’re *supposed* to be following us.’

‘Can’t! This is faster,’ Johnno pointed out. ‘By about twenty knots.’

They sped on.

‘That’s Oxford, Boss,’ Johnno pointed out ten minutes later. Time passed slowly, despite the ground rushing past in a blur.

‘We’ll pick up the M40 motorway soon, sir,’ the pilot informed him. ‘That’s Didcot power station in the distance, two o’clock.’

Thomas checked his watch.

‘No,’ Otto informed him in German. ‘Direction, military direction.’ He pointed. ‘Ahead is twelve o’clock, behind is six o’clock.’

Thomas worked it out, glancing out of the window, pointing at the power station’s stacks with a smile.

Ten minutes later the pilot announced, ‘Approaching restricted Heathrow airspace, sir.’

‘Avoid frightening them, but stick to the fastest route to Kent. Go low if you have to.’

‘Going to be some awkward questions afterwards, sir.’

‘If there’s anyone left alive in London,’ Beesely quietly pointed out.

A pleasant, yet professionally detached voice came on. ‘Unidentified helicopter bearing zero nine five, passing Heathrow one mile north, please identify yourself.’

‘How should I respond?’ the pilot asked.

‘I’ll handle it,’ Johnno suggested. ‘Heathrow control, this is SAS assault team Kilo-Two bearing zero-nine-five, heading to London on active service. All enquiries to the Home Secretary,

or Commanding Officer, SAS Barracks, Hereford. Kilo-Two out.'

They waited. Nothing.

Johno turned his head. 'Did the trick.'

'Call up the Yanks,' Beesely ordered.

Johno altered the radio settings, leaving the pilot to fly as London streets began to flash by. 'Mike Whiskey One-Niner, this is Kilo-Two, over.'

'Kilo-Two, go ahead, over.'

'Mike-Whiskey, do you have an update on the target, over?' Johno requested.

'Kilo-Two, the target is moving slowly north-west. We do not have any street name over-lay mapping ability, but can give you an exact track and distance. Change to heading zero nine one, nine miles out.'

'Shit, they're in London!' Johno shouted.

'Get me Dame Helen!' Beesely barked.

'Kilo-Bravo, receiving? Over,' Johno asked.

'Kilo-Bravo here, go ahead.'

'Helen, they are in South London!' Beesely told her.

'We've closed all the roads north over the river, roadblocks everywhere.'

'I need you to get everyone on the ground to track us and the police to look up for us, black helicopter with numbers on the side –' He tapped the pilot's arm.

'Hotel-Golf-Kilo-Two-Nine.'

'Get that, Helen?'

'Yes. Look out for some help from above.'

'Coming up on the river,' Johno pointed out. 'Got to talk to the Yanks. Mike-Whiskey, this is Kilo-two. Update, over.'

'Kilo-two, change track to zero eight nine, six miles.'

'Fuck, there's RAF Harriers up there,' Johno informed them. They all peered up.

'What the hell can they do?' Beesely scoffed. 'They're not about to bomb London streets, waste of bleeding time.'

'Police helicopters ahead,' Johno shouted. 'Fucking loads of them. I can see at least five of the fuckers!'

'More like it,' Beesely suggested. 'It's not the bleeding Battle of Britain!'

‘Thomas,’ Johno called. ‘Look out for Spitfires!’ Missing the joke, Thomas peered up. ‘They’re following,’ Johno informed them, craning his neck around as the yellow and blue police helicopters changed direction.

‘Kilo-two, change heading to zero-nine-seven, target has turned south-west. Three miles.’

They closed at speed, Thomas delighted at the London scenes to the north. He could see the city, Battersea Power Station towers and the bridges over the river.

‘Beesely,’ Johno called. ‘They’re already far enough in to cause panic and devastate a big chunk of South London.’

Beesely took a breath and glanced at Otto, but answered Johno. ‘Should the cards fall face up, do what you can.’ Otto did not understand.

‘Shit,’ Johno shouted. ‘Someone order up a 747?’

They all stared out of the windows. Mike-Whiskey appeared through the clouds at around five thousand feet, slowly circling.

‘Kilo-Two, change track to one-zero-five. 1 mile.’

Beesely gazed down at the houses and the traffic. People were going about their business; off to work, shopping, coming home from work, unaware as to what was going on. His stomach started to knot. They descended even lower, houses now shooting by.

‘Kilo-two, reduce speed, track zero-nine-one, we are going to real time updates. ‘Port five ... port five ... ease down ... starboard five ... starboard five ... port five ... steady ... standby to stop ... standby ... on-target.’

‘There’s a line of traffic down there,’ Johno shouted. ‘Can’t see which one. Mike-Whiskey, there are a lot of vehicles, we can’t detect which one.’

‘Kilo-Two, real-time again, watch for movement. ‘Port five ... stop ... ahead slow ... stop ... overhead.’

‘This is fucking useless!’ Johno screamed.

‘Look,’ Otto shouted. ‘Police cars approaching, from the left.’

‘They’re stuck in traffic,’ Johno observed.

‘There,’ Beesely shouted. ‘Nine o’clock position, two patrol cars closing in.’

‘This is Blackheath,’ the pilot informed them. ‘We’re over the road going past the park if you want to call it in.’

‘They can see us,’ Beesely said.

‘Port five ... steady ... wait, vehicle now moving in opposite direction,’ came from the 747.

‘There!’ Johnno shouted. ‘That car’s done a u-turn on the grass, heading back. Get behind it.’

‘Steady ... on target ... on target ... starboard five... on target.’

‘That’s it, green estate car,’ Johnno shouted. ‘It’s going across the park.’ He checked the streets ahead. ‘All the coppers are north of here, behind us.’ He glanced over his shoulder at Thomas, the boy wide-eyed with curiosity and excitement, then seized the control column. ‘I have control.’

‘What are you doing?’ the pilot protested.

Johnno swapped hands on the control column, took out his pistol and thrust it into the neck of the pilot. ‘Two seconds to live or die, I don’t care either way.’

‘Johnno?’ Otto called.

Terrified, the pilot raised his hands off the controls. Johnno put the pistol under his groin and nosed the helicopter down, straight for the estate car, the windscreen filling with the view of the road through the park.

Otto shot forwards. ‘Johnno! What are you doing?’

Beesely pulled him back. ‘His job.’

Clearly terrified, Otto stared back at Beesely.

Johnno banked hard to miss electricity lines before banking sharply the opposite way. The surprised driver now glanced out of his side window, directly at Johnno, closer than any motorist would ever want to be to a helicopter in flight.

The estate car neared the crest of the rise as the helicopter passed it, the road surrounded by flat parkland - as Johnno had hoped for. He hit the pedals hard and spun around so that they were angled down and flying backwards with their momentum, pinned into their seats.

‘Jesus!’ the pilot screamed.

The estate was going too fast to stop. Johnno edged forwards, the rotor-blades inching towards the road, their helicopter now little more than ten feet above the ground.

Driving towards a helicopter's rotor-blades was just about as frightening an experience as any driver could face - even in London traffic! The driver panicked, hit the brakes and tried to turn at the same time, something they teach you not to do in defensive driving classes. He lost control, hit the kerb and rolled.

Before the estate had a chance to end up in the helicopter's rotor-blades Johno accidentally clipped the road. Rotors shattered and flew off. With little more than ten foot of altitude their downward momentum was not great, Johno focused on a drain covering as it rapidly filled his forward view.

They were on their side in an instant, hitting the road hard on their right side. The windows shattered, showering them with glass. The tail rotor touched ground and shattered, its blades tearing through their housing. In two seconds they were a wreck of metal, the engine screeching its complaint, gears registering a lack of resistance and burning themselves out. Thomas screamed, the pilot now unconscious.

Johno hung in his harness, fighting to get it off, blood trickling across his face. Lights flashed on the control panel and a warning sounded for a brief second before losing power. Through the gaps where the windscreen used to be he could see the car, now upright, but dented all over.

Holding onto his door with his left hand and pulling with all his strength he righted himself, pulling his head away from the pilot and wondering why it was so quiet. Fumbling, he found the pistol still underneath his groin. Grabbing it he pulled hard with his left arm, tilted his head and aimed, hanging little more than fifteen feet from the driver's window.

First shot. The glass fractured, turning white.

Second shot, a small hole.

Third shot, more careful, all the glass gone now. A head popped up and looked directly at him. Two shots straight to the face. The face dropped out of view.

More movement. Passenger? Two shots. Pause. No movement.

Lowering his aim, driver's door. Three careful shots. A metallic echo.

He gripped the pistol in his teeth, unbuckling and falling onto the pilot. Pulling on the broken glass that edged the smashed windscreen he clambered awkwardly out. Immediately his right leg gave way as passing motorists stopped. Someone with a kite was running towards them. He tried to stand, hobbling as best he could. Four small steps and he was there, walking through an odd bubble of silence.

A woman in a red sweater. Her lips were moving, mouthing something at him. She offered him a hand. 'Are you alright?' It sounded as if she was talking to him underwater.

He raised the pistol, shooting the driver in the head at point blank range. From the corner of his eye he could see the woman screaming and running in slow motion. He leant right into the car, pistol against the temple of the passenger, a single, muffled, shot. Back seat? Clear. He holstered his pistol.

Dragging himself around to the boot in slow motion, people came running and shouting, odd, muddled screams. The boot was open and inch and so he lifted it higher. Blankets. He tore them off. Large metal case. Closed, two clips. Big handles.

He grabbed a handle, pulling. It was too heavy. Bent double he dragged it to the edge of the boot and stopped. His hearing suddenly came back, so to the pain. From everywhere!

Helicopters, lots and lots of helicopters flittering about above him, the sky full of them. A loud noise from behind caused him to turn. He raised a hand against the bright sunlight and squinted: Army Lynx helicopter, soldiers jumping out and running towards him. They ran past, one either side, firing at the driver and passenger, ten rounds into each man.

'Johno! Johno!' a soldier called from somewhere.

Johno grabbed the first trooper, bending him towards the metal case. 'Pick it up! Can't leave it here!'

The soldier grabbed the other end, a third helping. They started towards the Lynx. Johno limped, every step agony, the pain etched into his face as the Lynx pilots frantically tried to wave them off. A third soldier opened the rear doors of the Lynx, the floor space more than enough to get the box in. Awkwardly, four of them laboured to get it inside.

The soldier started climbing in after it. Johnno grabbed him and flung him back hard, closing the door, turning the handle so that it sank into its recess.

Sergeant Mason, team leader, grabbed Johnno by the shoulder and swung him around. 'What the fuck you doing?' he shouted over the helicopter's engine noise and downdraft, their faces almost touching.

Johnno grabbed the man's shoulder and put his face up against the sergeant's ear. 'That bomb could go off at any time! It's a nuke!' The sergeant raised an arm, stopping his men from approaching the Lynx - or punching Johnno.

Johnno opened the navigator's door, the man trying to shout above the noise of the engines, and failing. Johnno leant inside, grabbed the man's harness buckle and undid it. He dragged the struggling man out and dropped him on his head, the co-pilot's helmet connection dangling out of the door.

Surprisingly fast the man jumped back onto his feet. Johnno noticed him out of the corner of his eye just as the man grabbed his left arm. He swung around and hit him square on the chin, knocking him backwards, dazed. Sergeant Mason grabbed the navigator and dragged him back several yards. Johnno clambered awkwardly in and closed the door. Taking out his pistol he put it under the chin of the pilot, pointing skywards with his left hand.

Considering the amount of blood streaming down Johnno's face, combined with what the pilot had just witnessed - both from in the air and with his navigator - the pilot decided not to argue and pulled back on the cyclical control. They began to climb, leaving the aircraft's previous occupants, the four SAS troopers, stood on the grass and watching.

3

Johnno put the pistol under his groin. He could see Beesely and Otto crawling away from their wrecked helicopter, Thomas trying to drag them. Checking behind the pilot's seat Johnno found and grabbed a headset, fumbling with it and eventually plugging it in. 'You hear me?'

‘Who the hell are you?’ the pilot barked as they gained altitude.

‘SAS.’

‘Not for long, arsehole. You assaulted my navigator... and you’re commandeering a military helicopter at gunpoint!’

Johnno took out his pistol. ‘There’s an unstable nuclear bomb on the back seat.’ The pilot’s eyes widened and he strained to glimpse it. ‘We can stay here and chat about it, waiting for it to go off, or we can take it somewhere other than central fucking London.’ He put the pistol under the pilot’s chin again. ‘What ya reckon, fly boy?’

The pilot swallowed. ‘You don’t need the gun.’ He checked over his shoulder again as they climbed. ‘Christ.’

‘Head east, down the Thames, keep it low. If it goes off then we want to minimise the blast area.’

The pilot glanced at Johnno, clearly terrified, before heading north the short distance to the Thames, turning hard right at rooftop level and speeding towards the Thames Barrage, glistening in the sun a quarter mile ahead.

Employment references

1

Beesely stood laughing, watching the Lynx fly off. Blood oozed out of a cut above his eye, his lips bleeding as well. 'Fly you bastard! Fly!' he shouted with what energy he had left. 'Fly you magnificent bastard! Fly!'

Soldiers began to help him away from the wrecked Squirrel, but they all stopped and watched as the Lynx disappear behind houses. Sirens wailed, a dozen helicopters buzzed overhead, some following the Lynx.

'Fly you bastard,' Beesely quietly repeated, linking arms with Otto and now being helped by Thomas - who had managed to come away with no injury and was enjoying it all greatly - concerned only that Uncle Johnno would have to pay for the damages.

Otto made direct eye contact with Beesely. 'Are you crazy?' he whispered. 'Why are you so happy?'

Soldiers tended their cuts.

'He did it!' Beesely announced, straining to catch his breath. 'He did it, by God.'

'What are you saying?' Otto pleaded, their faces close.

Beesely made eye contact. 'He saved us all.'

'Saved us?' Otto snarled. 'He nearly killed us all! You, me and Thomas.'

Beesely held him by the shoulders, their faces close together. 'Everything Johnno cares about is right here - you, me ... and especially Thomas. The British Government, they let him down many times.' He forced a breath. 'But ... but when it really mattered, when London was under threat, he did not hesitate to sacrifice us all - everything dear to him - to try and save London. Magnificent.'

'I don't understand!' Otto barked.

'No ... you probably don't. Not yet.' Beesely took a few steps, wobbling a bit, before taking out his phone. 'Get me Dame Helen.' He waited, panting and trying to catch his breath.

‘Beesely, what’s happening, have you found its location yet?’

‘Yes, we found it. It’s in the back of an army Lynx helicopter, heading ... well, heading somewhere fast.’

‘Thank God.’

‘Listen, track that Lynx ... find out where it’s going.’ He made eye contact with Otto. ‘I suspect the English Channel or the North Sea.’ He hung up.

‘The North Sea?’ Otto asked, frowning. ‘To do what?’

Beesely breathed in and out, holding his chest. ‘To get that bomb a long way away from here,’ he quietly stated.

‘And how will he get back?’

Beesely smiled, slowly shaking his head.

Otto then realised what Beesely had been implying. He slowly straightened. ‘He is not coming back,’ he whispered.

Otto turned, stepping away, holding his head and running blood-stained hands through his light brown hair. Yellow-clad officers rushed around, sirens wailed, helicopter engine noises overlapped and competed with each other, soldiers walked around with machineguns slung. ‘Jane, Ricky, now Johnno ... what have I done?’

A trooper approached Beesely. ‘Sir, your pilot is dead.’ Beesely glanced towards the wreckage. ‘Looks like a broken neck, sir.’

2

Heading down the Thames Johnno wiped his forehead with his sleeve, the blood starting to block his vision.

The pilot regarded him suspiciously. ‘You look a little old to be a trooper.’ They sped under Queen Elizabeth II Bridge, turning hard to follow the course of the river; a sharp left then long right turn, missing the mast of a yacht by a few feet.

Johnno checked his pockets for cigarettes. Distracted, he said, ‘After the SAS I worked for MI6 for ten years, then private agencies.’

‘So just how the hell did you end up tracking this bomb? And where the hell are we going with this thing?’

Johnno continued to search his pockets. 'Follow the Thames straight out to sea thirty miles then turn north east, up the North Sea till we run out of fuel.'

The pilot turned his head, his eyes wide, but said nothing. He turned back as they buzzed a ship at high speed, workers on the ship's bridge ducking.

They flew on, nothing said for five minutes.

'What happened back there?' the pilot finally asked, now sounding a little calmer.

'We tracked the radiation with a special Yank 747 kitted out to do that stuff. Car was going one way, plod the other, so I crashed my chopper into the road in front of it. Actually, I was aiming for the driver with the rotor blades.'

The pilot turned, looking horrified. And also amazed. 'Are you completely fucking mad?'

'It's a question ... that's been asked before. Not least by me.' Johnno glanced out of the window as at the blur of riverside buildings as they flashed by. 'You got a family, fly boy?'

The pilot seemed uncomfortable with the question. 'Wife and two kids, third on its way. What the fuck's it to you?'

Johnno scanned the controls. 'I can fly this. When we get near the coast fly up towards Ipswich, you can drop to the beach, I'll fly on.'

The pilot turned his head, as if studying Johnno, then just stared ahead. They said nothing for a minute. 'So I go home to my family ... you fly the bomb on – what - out to sea? That's your great plan?'

'Hadn't given a great deal of thought.' He tapped his jacket pockets and faced the pilot. 'Are you sure you don't have any cigarettes?'

They flew on, the pilot shaking his head.

'Why are you so damn casual about life and death?' the pilot asked. 'Where did you get that attitude?'

'Can't speak for anyone else ... but mine started as a kid - getting beat senseless by an old wino of a step-dad when I was twelve. The rest ... the Government had a hand in.'

The pilot nodded his understanding, but said nothing. He judged the next yacht and deliberately buzzed it, noting

Johno's glance as he dipped lower. Any enquiry would reveal that he had been held at gunpoint, so no comeback.

The radio crackled into life. 'Golf Romeo Two, receiving, over?'

The pilot responded. 'Golf Romeo Two, receiving.'

'Golf Romeo Two, what is your heading and speed, over?'

'Golf Romeo Two. We are bearing zero-eight-five, two-zero-zero knots. Altitude ... around twenty feet!'

'Golf Romeo Two, what is your intended destination, over?'

'We're heading towards the middle of the North Sea, over.'

'Golf Romeo Two, do you have the package on board, over?'

'I have package and passenger, over.'

'Golf Romeo Two, standby.'

Open water lay ahead. Johno pointed, 'Follow the coast, I'll drop you off somewhere.'

'This has auto-pilot, dumb fuck.'

Johno shook his head. 'Can't take the risk of it circling and crashing.'

'It's pretty good, but I suppose a mechanical failure could cause it to turn.'

'What's our fuel and range?'

'We're good for another hundred miles.'

'It's enough.'

The pilot studied Johno. 'There're life rafts under the seats. The water is warm enough this time of year, so you could be picked up. Wait until there's just ten minutes fuel then jump. That way it couldn't circle back around from a system failure or mechanical fault.'

Johno stared back at him. 'You're awfully frigging concerned for my safety all of a sudden.'

'Had time to think. What you did back there, stopping the soldiers getting on board, throwing out my navigator, letting me jump - pretty damn selfless act.'

'Ha!' Johno snorted. 'Like I give a fuck about your navigator.'

'How did you get so bitter?'

'How long have you got?'

‘Rest of my life by the looks of it. All thirty minutes of it.’

Johnno glanced at him. ‘You’ll live, if that thing don’t go off.’

‘So could you.’

Johnno stared at the mass of instrumentation: dials, flashing lights, artificial horizon adjusting itself - lower half brown for the ground, upper half a light blue-grey for the sky. ‘This is as good an end as any. Probably get a posthumous medal and be buried by fork-lift truck.’

The pilot frowned heavily. ‘Fork-lift truck?’

‘Long story. My mate died from radiation poisoning...’

‘That guy Ricky?’

‘Yeah?’ Johnno queried, facing the pilot. ‘How’d you know?’

‘The SAS guys were talking about it earlier, on the flight down. Funeral in Malvern, wasn’t it? So you must be other one they spoke about. Something about Kosovo and some miracle rescue. So which one of the two were you, the first in or the rescuer?’

‘First in. Took seven rounds.’

‘So, I’m sat with a celebrity. And that guy Ricky went in after you. And now he’s dead.’

‘Yep. Lead lined casket filled with concrete –’

‘Hence the need for a fork-lift!’

‘Yep. He found the box in the back. Stupid bastard put his hand in it, dead two hours later. He was a good man, not least for saving my arse in Kosovo.’

‘So all this is connected. This device killed him, now it’s going to kill you. If you let it.’

‘Symmetry, eh?’ Johnno quipped, wiping blood off his face.

The pilot looked Johnno up and down. ‘And what would Ricky say if he was here, now?’

Johnno stared ahead, giving it some thought. ‘He’d probably say, *jump out and let the ponsy Army Rupert get a posthumous medal.*’

The pilot laughed. ‘I’m a Sergeant, arse-hole - I work for a living. This is Army Air Corps, not the frigging Royal Air Force! Most of us are Sergeants or Warrant Officers.’

‘In which case ... I feel a little worse for putting a gun in your neck. But just a little.’

The pilot pressed a button. ‘Golf Romeo Two to base, over.’

‘Golf Romeo Two, go ahead over.’

‘Golf Romeo Two, launch air-sea rescue and notify shipping. I will give you headings and positions every ten minutes. Expect to ditch forty miles east of Cromer in ... twenty minutes. Look for two life-rafts, over.’

‘Golf Romeo Two, roger. Be advised, you have military traffic high, tracking you.’

They both peered up and around, squinting. ‘There,’ the pilot pointed. ‘Tornados. You know, once we jump they could shoot this thing down.’

‘It’s an option. You got any morphine?’

The pilot looked Johnno up and down. ‘You banged up?’

‘Big time.’

‘You’ll not survive the jump if you are doped up, not that I could reach the first aid kit, it’s right next to our *package*. Doubt there’s any morphine in there anyway.’ The pilot changed course. ‘See that beach, *you’re* getting out. Or you’re going to have to shoot me!’

Johnno cranked his head around. ‘And the package?’

The pilot stared straight ahead, swallowed and took a breath. ‘I know what’s required of me. And out of the two of us, I’m the only one who can get it done.’ He faced Johnno. ‘And you look like you are about to pass out.’

They slowed, landing on the beach, Johnno dropping unceremoniously onto the wet sand, the Lynx pulling up sharply a second later and heading out to sea without delay. Johnno managed to sit upright and ease off his jacket as a bewildered old lady holding her dog looked on. He reached for his phone, lying back down on the damp sand as two RAF Harriers screamed overhead, circling. He closed his eyes against the bright sun.

‘This is Johnno. Fix this location and send my co-ordinates to Dame Helen. Put me through to Beesely.’ He waited.

* * *

Leaning across his study desk, Pepi rested his weight on his hands, his eyes widening and his mouth involuntarily opening. 'Say that again,' he got out in a forced whisper, two of his assistants stood in front of the desk.

'The Americans provided a special aircraft designed to detected radiation on the ground. They tracked the second vehicle to South London, a joint venture with K2.'

'The Americans, and K2, in a joint venture?' Pepi challenged, still whispering.

'Yes, sir. The Americans guided K2 to the car, the helicopter being flown by this man Johno –'

'Johno! Piloting the helicopter! That fat drunken idiot!'

'Yes, sir,' the man timidly responded. 'Beesely, Otto and the boy were in the back ... when this man Johno crashed the helicopter into the car with the ball bearings.'

The assistants wondered if their boss was well enough to continue. The first man added, 'Johno killed the drivers, took the ball bearings to a military helicopter and flew it out to sea.'

Pepi collapsed into his chair, loosening his tie as his assistants rushed around, one pouring a water for him.

3

Beesely's phone rang, being handed to him by Otto as the ambulance wailed its way, very slowly, to the nearest hospital through all the roadblocks.

'Beesely here. What? Hello? Johno! You're alive! Where the hell are you? Where? A beach in Norfolk? Stay put, help on its way. Where's the bomb? Heading out to sea? Excellent. Good work today, my boy, really good work. Call to let us know where you are. You what? You forgot that date with Alison Star, left her standing? She'll probably want you all the more now!' He hung up.

Thomas was pleased, Otto smiling and nodding. Otto suggested, 'It will be hard to avoid the publicity.'

'Doesn't matter. London *was not* destroyed today.' Beesely stared out of focus for a moment as he thought, then grabbed his phone and dialled. 'Get me Duncan!' He waited.

‘Duncan here.’

‘It’s Beesely, what’s on the wire?’ He had to shout to make himself heard.

‘Bloody world’s coming to an end! Panic, stock market crash, people rushing to get home, trains and tubes blocked –’

‘Listen carefully, I want this story on the wire immediately, quoting an official source, out to everyone, especially radio.’

‘MI6 agents, with the help of a special American Air Force 747, tracked the dirty-bomb that was in a car as it approached London. They intercepted it in Blackheath where MI6 agents deliberately crashed their helicopter into the car. Despite being injured they engaged the terrorists in a gun battle and killed them. SAS troopers landed in an Army Lynx on Blackheath Common and mopped up, securing the bomb and taking it away to a safe location. Got that?’

‘Shit ... how much of that is true?’

‘Basically ... all of it. Get to work, and don’t worry about the stock market. Oh, wait. Make that half an hour, then all media at the same time. OK?’

He hung up and made eye contact with Otto. ‘Get the CEO of our bank on the line, Mathius, then the head of the Swiss banking society, the secret one.’ Otto lifted his phone as the ambulance cornered hard. Beesely shouted into his own, ‘Get me Oliver Stanton at The Lodge!’ He waited.

‘Beesely? Olly here, what’s happening?’

‘We found the bomb and dealt with!’

‘Oh, thank God, we –’

‘Listen, UK stock market crashing, but we dealt with the bomb. Tip off everyone you can ... to buy into the UK market, it’s going to bounce right back up. Got that?’

‘Yes. God, what *is* that noise?’

‘I’m in an ambulance.’

‘Are you hurt?’

‘We all are, but nothing serious. Johno rammed the terrorist car with our chopper!’

‘He did what?’ Oliver screamed.

‘Talk later. Must go.’ Beesely redialled. ‘Get me Dame Helen.’ He waited, Otto indicating he had someone waiting on the line.

‘Beesely? What’s that noise?’ she yelled.

‘I’m in an ambulance.’

‘Are you hurt?’

‘Yes, but never mind. Tell the Chancellor I’m going to prop up the UK stock market. Oh, and I’ve put a story out on the wire, back me up.’

‘What?’

‘You heard, just tell the chancellor to relax. Call you later.’

Otto handed him his phone. ‘Bank CEO.’

‘Hello, this is Beesely, that you Mathius?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Listen, the UK stock market is crashing because of the nuclear bomb incident –’

‘Nuclear bomb?’

‘Yes, but we intercepted it, Johno has flown it out to sea–’

‘Johno?’

‘Long story. Listen, UK stock market crashing, but it will recover quickly. Use all available, and practical, resources to look for bargains and buy them up. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. In fact, use all of my personal cash funds to buy into the UK market, pick some good stocks. What we know, the markets don’t know yet. Not for thirty minutes at least. Understand?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Get to it!’

Beesely handed back Otto’s phone as his own chirped. The ambulance began to slow, then reverse.

‘Herr Beesely?’ a heavily accented voice asked.

‘Yes?’

‘It is director the bank *society*. You have the urgent problem?’

‘*We* have an urgent opportunity. The UK stock markets have crashed –’

‘And as well in Europe.’

‘Really? Well, it was on news of a nuclear bomb in London. We have dealt with that bomb, it has been made safe and flown away. The markets do not know that fact yet.’

‘I understand.’

‘Buy what you can, especially in the UK, it will bounce back tomorrow.’

‘Thank you.’

Beesely hung up as the ambulance doors opened, to be greeted by five doctors and a dozen armed officers, the street behind filled with patrol cars, lights flashing. ‘Oh shit.’

4

With her arms folded Dame Helen looked out over the helicopters on Chequers lawn, at the soldiers patrolling and the armed police officers in bright yellow jackets circling the house. The P.M. and the Home Secretary walked briskly in, both looking harassed.

‘Helen?’ the P.M. called. ‘What’s the latest?’

She smiled. ‘Bomb is on its way to the bottom of the North Sea, along with one of our Army Lynx helicopters.’

The P.M. stiffened, looking horrified. ‘The pilots?’

‘In the water, in life rafts. Weather is good, air-sea rescue is on its way.’

The Prime Minister brightened. ‘Excellent.’

‘Beesely has put a story out on the wire –’

The Prime Minister straightened. ‘He what?’

‘Don’t know what it says yet.’

The Home Secretary appeared equally horrified. ‘Christ!’

‘One more thing, he said to tell the chancellor that *he* is going to prop up the crashing stock market.’

The Prime Minister’s eyes widened. ‘He’s what?’

An assistant walked in with a piece of paper. ‘Prime Minister?’ he called as he approached, but did not wait to hand over the note. He read it. ‘Radio is reporting that MI6 agents rammed their helicopter into the terrorists’ car, there was a gun battle, SAS jumped out of another helicopter and killed the terrorists, grabbed the bomb and flew it to an undisclosed location.’

The P.M. turned to Dame Helen, smiling. ‘We’re going to have to co-ordinate the news carefully today.’

‘Yes, Prime Minister.’

The assistant added, ‘They’re lapping it up, sir, the media.’

The P.M. offered them all a formal smile. ‘Let’s get some coffee and nibbles, then continue the COBRA meeting in –’ He checked his watch. ‘- say ten minutes. I have some calls to make.’

Helen took the Prime Minister by the arm and to a quiet corner. ‘I’ll have to apologise to General Rose and eat my words.’

‘Oh?’

‘Beesely, he does seem to be an American asset. The terrorist car was tracked by a special USAF 747, especially equipped for this very purpose. *He* ... organised it, by himself. We had no idea.’

‘That confirms what General Rose has, apparently, always maintained. Still, it’s clear that Beesely’s position in this Swiss outfit is ... NATO led, shall we say. Whether he’s in bed with the Americans or not, I don’t think there could have been a sterner test of his loyalty to this country ... than that which we witnessed today.’

‘Yes, Prime Minister,’ Dame Helen whole-heartedly agreed. ‘Does that mean that I *don’t* have to apologise to General Rose?’ she toyed.

Dame Helen walked out through the patio windows and onto the lawn, breathing slowly and deeply. She dialled. ‘I want all footage from all police helicopters near Blackheath today to be grabbed by armed agents, ‘D’ Notice on it all. Top priority, I want men there when they land. And that story in the press, I want an *official* confirmation of the main points. Yes, I’m sure. And I want it done now. Also use our usual outlets to confirm the story - *unofficially official*.’

She re-dialled. ‘Colonel Milward? Helen Eddington-Small. Yes, you too. This morning? Seems like a lifetime ago, I know. Listen, pick four men and two pilots, those closest to today’s action, they are going to be nominated for medals. I’ll explain later, just get me the details of the warm bodies – we’re going to rush it through for the press, keep certain other people *out* the press.’

She took a breath then re-dialled. ‘Yes, it’s me. Beesely is in an ambulance. Track it down and get some protection for him. Find out where he is and then get him shipped to a private hospital, use ours if you can.’

* * *

Milward lowered his phone, stood now facing six officers crammed into his office. All had been previously shouting bits of info. He held up his hands to cut them off. ‘OK, now is there a problem with the space-time continuum? Have I just jumped across to some strange parallel universe?’ He slumped into his chair. ‘MI6 wants four of our lads, any four, to be nominated for medals.’

‘How about the four who landed, they *were* there?’ an officer suggested to a glum-looking Milward.

Milward waved his hand. ‘Fine,’ he said without looking up.

‘Should we recall all the active units?’ another officer asked.

‘No,’ Milward answered. ‘Wait until the Cabinet Office stands them down officially.’ He rubbed his face, pointing at his adjutant. ‘Start from the beginning, nice and slow, what we definitely know.’

‘Right, Johno tried to ram the suspect car with his helicopter –’

‘Didn’t just crash nearby?’

‘No, sir, our guys had a ringside seat. He carefully manoeuvred to try and hit the car with his rotor blades, daft sod. Then he shot the occupants whilst still in the wrecked chopper, crawled out, shot them again, grabbed the box with Sergeant Mason, put it in the Lynx, pushed Mason away, dragged the navigator out and smacked him cold, put a gun to the head of the pilot and flew off.’

‘And does anybody else feel like they need a really, really big Brandy?’

A few officers nodded, not realising it had been meant sarcastically.

Quite a crowd had gathered around Johnno as he lay on the sand, jacket off and shoulder holster visible, the blood from various minor head-wounds slowly congealing. The old woman had rushed off after her dog started to lick him, and he had threatened it at gunpoint. A family of five had offered first aid, which Johnno had refused, but he had accepted a cigarette. Or ten.

People were enjoying the RAF Harriers circling closely, something of a fun-day-out for the kids, and new arrivals were being told of the man who fell out of a helicopter. Now sirens wailed in the distance as Johnno worked on his tan. His injuries were not severe or debilitating, but with the adrenaline rush now over he felt completely drained as the drone of an RAF Sea King helicopter grew rapidly louder.

‘You best head up the beach,’ Johnno suggested the family. ‘Be safer for you.’

They hurried off up the beach, but stopped where they could view the excitement, others moving back as the helicopter descended. Johnno covered his eyes with a hand, knowing what came next.

The large yellow rescue helicopter hovered, setting down a few yards away, its winch-man jumping out whilst it hovered, still a foot off the ground. Now he knelt on the sand next to Johnno, Johnno’s bloody cuts being neatly filled in with sand.

‘Are you Sergeant John Williams?’ the crewman shouted.

Johnno gave him a thumbs-up, just as the downwash blew his cigarette out of his mouth. He watched it roll away. ‘Bugger.’

Another crewman knelt down a moment later, stretcher in hand. They laid it next to Johnno, tucked his jacket in and eased him over. Strapping him in they took either end and manoeuvred it into the back of the helicopter.

A police officer tapped the shoulder of the second crewman, who remained stood on the sand. The crewman turned and led the young officer away, the officer holding on tightly to his hat.

‘What is it?’ the crewman shouted, lifting his helmet away from his ear.

‘That man, he threatened an old woman at gunpoint!’

‘Must be some mistake, he’s fucking SAS!’ The officer stared back, confused. The crewman added, ‘See those planes up there, they’re here for him, now piss off.’ He turned and ran, hopping into the back and sliding the door closed. With the door slammed shut the noise level dropped, but remained at such a level that normal conversation was difficult.

‘Were you injured?’ a crewman asked, putting a white dressing on Johnno’s head.

‘Superficial lacerations on the scalp, right knee screwed up, right ankle, ribs. I’ll live. Got a smoke?’

The crewman smiled at each other. ‘No chance, mate. Not in here.’

The second crewman offered Johnno a drink from a white plastic bottle with an adjustable straw, lifting Johnno’s head.

‘What happened?’ the first crewman shouted as the helicopter climbed, the man carefully cleaning blood and sand from Johnno’s eyes.

‘Can’t say. Classified.’ Johnno stared up at the dark green roof.

The two crewmen glanced at each other, the first man tapping Johnno’s pistol. ‘With face fungus like that you’ve got to be old school SAS.’

Johnno offered a coy smile. ‘You might think that, I couldn’t possibly comment.’ The crewmen laughed.

‘We were listening to the radio chatter. Half the Air Force looking for that Lynx, the other half flying around not knowing what to do.’

‘Sounds about right, panic after the action is over,’ Johnno commented.

‘I’ve got some Nicotine patches, want some?’

‘Might help. Stick a dozen on.’

‘Another fucking stretcher, another fucking ambulance, another fucking hospital,’ Johnno stated to no one in particular.

This rarely used RAF ambulance had seen better days, and few patients other than new recruits with blisters and sprained

ankles. Its siren wasn't very loud, Johnno considered, wondering if it used to be an ice-cream van. Or maybe it was that ice-cream vans were all former RAF ambulances, he considered. It was just enough out of tune as to annoy its involuntary passengers.

The RAF ambulance technician turned around as they sped from the airfield to the base's small hospital. 'Don't like ambulances, mate?'

'Don't like getting shot up.'

The medic frowned. 'Are you shot?'

'Not recently.' Johnno lifted his shirt.

'Bloody hell, mate! Are those gunshot wounds?'

'No, they had trouble finding my appendix!'

'Really?'

Johnno rolled his eyes.

Johnno eased out of the wheelchair without any help, now with his jacket back on. Sand fell everywhere, earning him an unfriendly glare from a middle-aged nurse. The blood on his head and face had mostly dried, speckled with sand.

He was the only patient in this long ward; twenty beds on either side, neat military hospital blankets, uninviting pastel colours with drab grey thrown in. The ward displayed large painted radiators and visible pipe-work and the all-pervading smell of antiseptic. A shiver went through him.

'On the bed,' the senior doctor ordered, a grey haired man with an unfriendly stare. As with the others he wore a white doctor's coat with his rank on the shoulders; light blue stripes on dark blue cloth. Johnno's arrival had dragged the man away from something more important, or more interesting. Johnno was getting the impression that he was the only visitor so far this year.

'First things first,' Johnno stated, taking out his pistol and earning some strange and worried looks. He pressed the magazine release and let it fall onto the bed. Then he angled it down and pulled the slide back, ejecting a round.

'That was loaded!' the doctor complained. 'Didn't even have the safety on!'

‘And recently used to kill several people,’ Johno added, easing the slide forwards, pointing and firing, a click, before reloading the magazine and setting the safety on. He placed it on the bedside cabinet, easing off his wet, sand dabbled jacket.

He tossed the ejected round to the nurse. ‘Souvenir, love.’ Easing off his shoulder holster proved painful. Next he slipped off his blood-soaked shirt.

‘Flipping blink!’ the doctor said as he observed Johno’s scars. ‘What the hell happened to you? And just who the hell are you? We were told to expect a serving Sergeant, Army Air Corps.’

‘When I was younger I was into really kinky bondage and S and M. Went a bit too far,’ he lied. ‘Rest is classified.’

‘What on earth are these?’ the nurse asked, peeling off numerous nicotine patches.

‘Nicotine patches.’

‘Aren’t you supposed to use them one at a time?’ she asked, frowning.

He sat on the edge of the bed, easing off his trousers and getting down to his Simpsons shorts. He laid back and sighed. ‘Do your worst.’

The nurse began cleaning his scalp as the doctor went toe-to-head, examining him.

‘Ankle sprained,’ the doctor announced. Johno winced, confirming the brilliantly insightful diagnosis. ‘Knee sprained, maybe ligament problem. You had surgery on your knee before?’

‘Had fucking surgery everywhere before.’

‘Well, it looks as if you have exacerbated an old injury there.’

‘Two broken ribs, five and six, right side,’ Johno announced to the magnolia ceiling.

‘You some sort of medic?’ the doctor asked as he probed them.

‘SAS field medic. Got a merit badge for putting on plasters. Also got a merit badge in the Scouts for warming up sausages in tin foil.’

A Wing Commander strode purposefully in, halting at the foot of the bed. ‘Are you Sergeant John Williams?’ Johno

gave a lazy, and insolent, thumbs up. 'I just had the Defence Minister on the line.' The base commander put his hands on his hips. 'Seems that some daft-sod SAS trooper just intercepted a nuclear bomb in London and flew it out of the capital and to the North Sea, having killed a car load of terrorists first.'

The doctors and nurses stopped what they were doing and stepped back.

'Anyone you know?' the Wing Commander teased.

Johno lifted his head up, turning on his side, his weight on an elbow. 'Listen, stripy –' the Wing Commander raised his eyebrows at the insolence, a reference to the many rank stripes on his shoulders. '- there's an Army Lynx pilot heading out to the middle of the North Sea –'

'Who we picked up a few minutes ago. Apparently, the first thing he did was to check if *you* made it. He's on his way here, one shiny new Lynx on its way to the bottom of the North Sea.'

Johno sighed. 'I'm going to have to insist on max' security on all this, Biggles. Plus a mug of tea and a fag.'

The Wing Commander smiled. 'Get the insolent little bastard *anything* he wants. And I mean anything! Now I have to go and call the Defence Minister.'

6

'It's not serious,' Beesely protested as the doctors began to undress him. Otto sat on the next bed, being tended to by a nurse for cuts, Thomas annoying the uniformed officers by playing with their equipment belts.

The young Asian doctor glanced over his shoulder at the armed officers. 'Are they really necessary?' he complained.

The senior officer stepped forwards. 'Mate, you do your job, we'll do ours, OK. Mister Beesely does not go out of line of sight, got it!'

'Your cuts are superficial,' a second doctor began, 'but at your age they'll take weeks to heal. You're going to have one hell of a black eye. In fact, the whole of your face is probably

going to go yellow, purple and black. Your knee is jarred, but nothing looks broken. Were you unconscious at any time?’

‘No,’ Beesely answered.

Otto casually informed the doctor, ‘There is a specialist geriatric cosmetic surgeon in Switzerland. He can remove the discolouration.’

‘If you’ve got the money!’ the doctor quipped.

‘We do,’ Otto flatly stated.

The doctor made eye contact, looking peeved. Beesely smiled. Lights were flashed into his eyes, his tongue pulled out as he said ‘Aaaah’, pulse checked and blood taken.

A hard-faced officer in a suit walked in, flashed his badge and ordered the police to wait outside. They went without argument.

‘Head of SIS sends her regards. We’re the *subtle* security, got a room in a private government hospital ready just as soon as you are, sir.’

‘Fine, wait for the doctor’s OK.’ He lay back. ‘Oh, get us some hats and sunglasses, and concoct a storey for the medical records. Car crash, let’s say.’

The doctor paused his treatment. ‘Just who are you, exactly?’

‘Best not to know, Doc’, the officer suggested as his phone rang. He stepped forwards, ‘Prime Minister for you, sir.’

The doctor stood upright, raising his hands as if in surrender before directing the rest of the medical staff out for five minutes.

* * *

Herr Mole had requested a file, now brought to him by the senior administrative manager himself, Claus. The man handed it over, but sat next to Mole and waited. Mole glanced up at him, then opened the file and found the page he wanted, the original transcript of the intelligence that led to Ricky intercepting the car in Hungary. With the aid of a pen he read it, moving the pen along under the words.

‘You read Russian?’

Mole gave a quick nod. 'This is mostly Ukrainian slang Russian, not the native Ukraine language itself. Unusual. I would suspect that the person who uttered these words was from the east of the Ukraine, a pro-Russian mining town.'

The admin manager raised his eyebrows. He pulled out a piece of paper from the file without disturbing Moles reading. 'Horlivka. In the south east.'

Mole raised his head. 'Yes, that would fit. And there is a nuclear power station not too far.' He read on. 'This man spent a lot of time in Russia, probably studied in Moscow, but a native of the region in question.' He underlined two words. 'This was wrongly translated.'

The admin manager leant forwards and studied the German translation. 'Weapons?'

'No, it actually says *dangerous weapon*, singular, not plural, a subtle difference. I believe this man to be lying, but this is clearly not a set-up for us because he was correct in his warning. Still, I will need the tape of the original conversation.'

'It is in the computer.' The manager pushed back on his wheeled chair and typed at a keyboard. Finally he held up a pair of headsets for Mole to use, others now gathering as Mole listened to the digitised recording.

'He is afraid ... concerned ... but also trying to warn Interpol. It sounds as if he is lying, but I think that is because he is not sure of what to tell them. I would assume that he was one of the people responsible for the radioactive ball bearings, but someone who changed his mind afterwards. We must establish his place of work.'

The manager stood. 'Make plans to get him, top priority.' He dialled Otto.

* * *

Otto took the call, listening at length. Finally he said, 'Move him to Zug.' He hung up.

'Problems?' Beesely asked, sipping tea. The small ward was now empty of the previous bustle, just the three of them and a Special Branch officer sat quietly in the corner.

‘We are going after the man who originally gave us the information about the vehicle we intercepted in Hungary. Actually, he called Interpol, which we intercepted.’

‘Good.’

‘Herr Mole re-translated the original documents and phone call, found some problems with the translation.’

‘Do we think this man set us up?’ Beesely asked, his face now covered in numerous opaque plasters supporting stitches.

‘No. Herr Mole believes he supplied the ball bearings then changed his mind and tipped off Interpol.’

Beesely pointed a finger. ‘I want him unharmed. For now.’

Otto acknowledged with a quick nod.

Beesely dialled The Lodge. ‘This is Beesely, tell Oliver that we have a lead on the radioactive ball bearings, may not be government level. Understand?’

After the call he let the phone hover. ‘Contact the Germans, see what they have on the first car and the passengers.’

7

Johno lay staring up at the ward’s high ceiling. The ward’s lights were now off, a solitary nurse at her station at the end of the long room, which seemed a hundred yards away. The headlights of traffic passing nearby cast long, mobile shadows across the ceiling, light coming in through high slotted windows. He lay under sheets, many parts of his body throbbing, considering escaping through the windows at the end since there was no way that he was getting any sleep tonight. Not in here.

Footsteps caught his attention. An officer in a blue RAF uniform with a rucksack walked up to the nurse, barely exchanging a word before stepping up to Johno’s bed. ‘You awake?’ he whispered.

‘Yeah, who are you?’

The officer knocked on a sidelight. ‘My name is Flight Lieutenant McNamara. I used to be Captain McNamara, ‘G’ Squadron.’

‘Ah ... Regiment Rupert.’

‘Call me Rupert and I’ll make sure they keep you here for a month!’

‘No need to be nasty,’ Johnno joked. ‘I’m wounded.’

The officer laughed quietly, producing several Whiskey miniatures. ‘These are low calorie so long as they go down in one go.’

Johnno cracked a seal, unscrewed the top and downed the contents in one go. ‘Sweet. What else you got, stripy?’

The officer handed him three more. ‘That should take the edge off. I know you have a thing about hospitals.’

Johnno squinted at the man through the poor light as he undid another bottle top, seeing if he knew him. ‘We met?’ He downed the contents.

‘No, but I worked with MI6 for two years, keeping an eye on ex-troopers, seeing what they were up to.’

‘Oh. *That* unit.’

‘Yeah, *that* unit.’

‘Thought it was mostly SIB flatfoots?’ Johnno queried.

‘It is, but a mix. You need anything?’ the officer asked.

‘Got any cigs?’

Smiling, the officer produced three packs and a lighter. ‘Keep them.’

‘Not such a bad twat after all. You based here?’

‘RAF Regiment,’ the officer explained. ‘Repetitively teaching the Crabs how to put on their respirators and survive a nuclear attack with a one millimetre cloth suit.’

‘Rock Apes, eh? Ricky was a Rock Ape before the Regiment.’

‘Sergeant Ricky Davies?’

‘Yeah, got himself killed a few days ago.’

‘Funeral in Malvern, I know. I keep my ear to the ground. Some people turned up that SIB were after.’

‘Did they *pinch* them?’

‘Nearly, turned into a big punch up, two SIB Captains went through a window.’

‘Good enough for ‘em.’

‘This outfit in Switzerland has a lot of people in a flap. No one can figure out what it is, or what it does.’

‘Best not to.’

‘Rumour has it that MI5 tried to get close to some of your lot a few weeks back. First MI5 agent got pulled on a drink drive charge, second got caught with child porn on his computer and the third woke up in a crack-house being raided by the local plod.’

Johno laughed quietly, glancing at the nurse. ‘If you know anyone interested, just tell them that Beesely spent forty years putting together this outfit,’ he lied. ‘Not to be screwed with. Besides, we do work for MI6, CIA and Mossad - plausible deniability.’

The officer frowned slightly. ‘So why are these Cambridge spooks trying to spy on you?’

‘Since when has the left hand known what the right had is doing, eh?’

The officer laughed, also checking over his shoulder. He opened a miniature and raised it for a toast. ‘Who dares wins!’

‘Who cares who wins?’ they said together. They clinked bottles and downed the contents.

McNamara hesitated. ‘What’s your relationship with General Rose?’ the officer enquired.

Johno studied him. ‘Why’d you ask?’

‘*You* ... were never on our watch list. He slid you back on a few weeks back.’

‘Nice of him. How much do you know about me?’

‘What’s in your file, and chit-chatting to troopers.’ He waited.

Johno turned away, taking a reflective moment. He sighed. ‘MI6 sent me into Kosovo, asked General Rose if they could borrow me. And I got shot the fuck up, as you know. MI6 wouldn’t organise a rescue, which I knew before I went in.’ He glanced at the ceiling. ‘Beesely was my handler – AGN Security, giving the Government plausible deniability. He wasn’t ready to give up on me, so he sent a rescue –’

‘Against the good general’s wishes,’ the officer finished off. ‘So Beesely got the cold shoulder, not a pat on the back.’

‘Politics,’ Johno carefully mouthed.

McNamara let out a deep breath.

‘What can I smell?’ Johno asked.

‘Ah, almost forgot. Double triple bacon quadruple cheese puke burger with extra cholesterol.’

‘Is it low calorie if eaten quickly?’ Johnno whispered.

‘Yes.’

He tucked in, soundly asleep thirty minutes later, the ‘evidence’ removed.

A new dawn, an old house

1

‘You OK?’ Beesely asked as they ate a late evening meal. They had said nothing for ten minutes.

Otto chewed, realising that it was not his health that Beesely was enquiring about. Otto put down his fork, but did not look up. Softly he said, ‘I was not prepared to sacrifice us all. We could have lost everything, all of us, in one moment.’

Beesely idled with his food. Quietly he stated, ‘If that bomb had gone off ... well, you saw what it did to the stock markets. Just how much would have been knocked off our stock? Seventy five percent maybe?’ He lifted his head and focused on Otto, waiting.

Otto reluctantly agreed. ‘Or more. Yes, I understand this, but at that moment you and Johnno were not thinking about money.’

‘No, my boy, we weren’t,’ Beesely answered as he picked at his food. ‘We had a single purpose - to save lives.’

Otto considered it. Without making eye contact he said, ‘I felt very angry, not proud of Johnno. Angry that he risked us all. Risked me.’

‘That’s understandable, to a degree,’ Beesely delicately suggested. ‘But what would *you* have done if that bomb was on its way to Zurich and we were the only ones capable of stopping it?’

Otto reluctantly gave it some thought. ‘Yes, I would have sacrificed myself to save the people there. I hope.’ He looked up, taking a deep breath. ‘But there are so many things I wish to do with K2 and the money, so many more things I want to achieve. I saw that all washed away, all the potential of what I want to achieve in my life.’

Beesely nodded to himself. ‘I read a story once, true story, of a man in Los Angeles, America. He played the same lottery numbers every week for years. One day they came up whilst he was in a bar. His friends knew he played those numbers, they all did. So he rushed home for the ticket, which was

worth ... probably more than fifty million pounds. When he arrived home he found that his wife had thrown out his trousers that day. He searched the bins, but they had been emptied. He drove to the tip, spoke to the people there, tried to find where it may have been dumped.

‘He then spent a year searching through that rubbish dump, living on the side of the dump and getting by on handouts. TV interviewed him several times. After a year he killed himself, I think.’

‘It is a very sad story.’

‘Very. To have so much potential, and then to lose it.’

Otto nodded and took a mouthful.

Beesely continued, ‘I sometimes feel like that man. I have a few years left and there is a hell of a lot I want to do as well. K2 has been a wonderful opportunity for me, but it looks like the universe, or God if you are that way inclined, has put conditions upon us. We get the money, but we also get the responsibility and the risk. Neither of us could just go and live on a Caribbean Island. Something would draw us back, or our enemies would come for us. If we had a small problem we’d wish we had the power to solve it. I’m afraid there’s no going back from here, we’ve opened Pandora’s box.’

Otto’s expression suggested he firmly agreed with that sentiment. ‘It is not how I pictured ... how we might do things.’

‘They never are. Johnno did not get that attitude all by himself. He was firmly shit on from a great height many times. I’m surprised he keeps it all together as well as he does. You ... should give him more slack.’

‘I know. I also know I am not the hero,’ he reluctantly admitted, as much to himself as Beesely.

Beesely and Otto had slept well, side-by-side in a lavish room normally used for senior government or intelligence service staff, this non-descript and unlisted building just off Harley Street.

Otto had already been awake for an hour when Beesely’s phone roused him. ‘Yes,’ Beesely answered, still groggy.

‘OK, Boss?’

‘Johno? Where are you?’

‘RAF Marham. Listen, discharging myself today, send a car. I’m going back to the old house, it’s not so far. Tell Otto to contact them and put the kettle on.’

‘Will do.’ They hung up.

Beesely turned to Otto. ‘He’s going back to the old house today, send a car and have the place made ready would you. He’s at RAF Marham.’

‘I would like to see the house again.’

Surprised by that, Beesely carefully studied his offspring

2

As Beesely’s helicopter touched down Johno observed it from the new conservatory, the insulation from the helicopter’s downdraft and drone perfect. He now sat in shorts and t-shirt, bandages around an ankle, a knee and his ribs, plasters covering stitches on his forehead. A guard sat opposite, they had been playing on the X-box 360 that the man had brought with him.

Beesely walked with a cane, Otto a bit of a limp, both now oddly kitted-out in blue tracksuits. Thomas jumped down and ran full pelt across the grass, into the house and found his way to Johno quickly.

‘Hey, brat!’ Johno called, holding out a hand.

The guard caught Thomas before he could jump on Johno.

‘Careful,’ Johno pleaded in German. ‘I’m hurt.’

‘How many times were you shot?’ Thomas excitedly asked.

‘I’m not shot, just hurt.’

Thomas was disappointed, his shoulders dropping.

‘What?’ Johno asked. ‘You’d be happier if I was shot?’

‘I told my friends you had been shot,’ Thomas admitted, lowering his head.

The guard laughed, earning a reproachful glare from Johno. Beesely and Otto waved as they walked around the conservatory and into the main entrance. The guard set about fetching more chairs.

‘OK,’ Johno sighed. ‘I was shot in the knee and the leg. OK?’

Thomas smiled and started to undo the bandages, the guard pulling him back.

‘We have enough milk in?’ Beesely asked as he hobbled in.

Johno lifted his head. ‘You look worse than me! Been jogging?’

‘All bruising, small cuts. Tracksuits courtesy of Dame Helen.’ He sat in a wicker chair, lifting his leg up onto a glass coffee table. The guard placed a cushion under it immediately.

Otto stood over Johno. ‘How are your injuries?’ he flatly asked.

‘I’ll live. Nothing serious.’

Otto bowed his head then sat at the far end of the conservatory. Johno observed him for a moment before making eye contact with Beesely whilst tipping his head towards Otto.

Beesely stated, ‘I don’t think Otto has quite forgiven you for risking us all.’

‘Had to be done.’

‘I know. And we now have the loving support of the British Government. I’ve spoken to the Prime Minister twice.’

‘Yeah, well he can use his influence. Just had Max on the phone, the wake got a bit lively after we left.’

Teas were placed down onto the glass coffee table.

‘Christ, I’d forgotten all about it. How did it go?’

‘The vicar did the service, all nice and proper, then the forklift couldn’t get into position properly, so the ‘old dogs’ offered to lift the casket, stupid sods. Took ten of them. Then they slipped on the mud and dropped the casket, ending upside down and at an angle.’

Beesely looked horrified as Johno laughed.

‘Then they filled in the grave with shovels. Wilko slipped in, got stuck, so they had to make a chain and drag him out, leaving a shoe behind. Took the family home, then had a few drinks in the marquee. Don’t know how or when that burnt down –’

‘Burnt down?’

‘- but they all moved to a nearby hotel.’

‘How’s the hotel?’ Beesely glumly enquired.

Johno gave him a pained look. ‘Wrecked!’

Beesely turned to Otto, who raised his phone, then back to Johno. ‘Anyone hurt?’

‘Nothing serious, few coppers hurt.’

‘As far as SAS wakes go ... quite sedate. So, what happened after you flew off?’

‘We flew down the Thames, up the coast. Had a chat with the pilot, nice guy. Offered to drop him off on the beach, but he talked me round, so *he* dropped *me* off on the beach then flew out forty miles and jumped.’

‘Is he OK?’ Beesely asked, concerned.

‘Yeah, spoke to him when I was at RAF Marham, they brought him in.’ Johno looked out over the lake. ‘Figured this was a good spot for recovering.’

Beesely studied Johno for several seconds. ‘Otto?’ Otto walked over. ‘The paper?’ Beesely called without taking his gaze off Johno. Otto handed Beesely the document, Beesely holding it up. ‘This is a Swiss banker’s draft for one ten million pounds. If you want it, it’s yours ... you can go your own way and do whatever you like. Nice house, nice cars, big yacht, girls with big boobs, a life in the sun.’

Johno glanced up at Otto, then back to Beesely, squinting at them. ‘What’s the catch?’

‘No catch. You’ve earned yourself a rest, and by God you deserve it more than most. You can take this and go your own way, or stay with us.’

‘Can I take that, and visit and annoy you once in a while?’

‘Anyway you like it. But if you stay with us ... you’ll probably end up in harm’s way again at some point.’

Johno stared out across the lake. ‘Otto, there’s a Lynx pilot who lives near Middle Wallop, needs a new house if you can sort it. Now, one of you fuckers who can walk without pain - get some food sorted. And you, old fart, put your paper away.’

Beesely smiled and looked up at Otto, handing back the paper. ‘Told you he’d be too daft to take it.’

Otto frowned down at Johno. ‘I will never understand you English types.’

Lynx pilot, Sergeant Peter Raines, had not long finished calming his family after the night away from them; police at the door, missing at sea. All was slowly coming back towards normality. A knock at the door and he insisted he better answer it, just in case it might be a reporter.

‘Hello?’ he said, eyeing the two men in suits suspiciously.

‘You are Sergeant Peter Raines?’ the first agent asked with a mild accent.

Raines cautiously nodded.

‘This is from Johnno. He says that he will be in touch soon, and that if you don’t have a good life he will track you down and kill you.’

Raines smiled as the second guard lifted up a large leather bag and opened it. Bursting out was a quarter million in cash.

3

The next morning Johnno hobbled into the conservatory. Beesely and Otto were already sat having coffee and cake. He slumped down into the same wicker chair, footstool ready with a cushion. ‘Been thinking.’

Beesely looked up from his newspaper, the pages cover-to-cover with the story of yesterday’s action. On the floor were dozens of other papers, their front pages featuring the same story.

Johnno continued, ‘We got anything on those four drivers?’

Otto lowered his paper. ‘Arabic. The Germans and Interpol cannot match any fingerprints, they are trying to trace their passports, which were Lebanese. We have copies of all the forensic materials in Zug, their chief investigator is one of ours.’

‘Lebanese?’ Johnno quietly repeated, staring out towards the lake.

Beesely studied him for a moment. ‘A penny for your thoughts.’

Johno pointed at Beesely's satellite phone, laying on the coffee table, and gestured for him to pass it over. He pressed green. 'This is Johno, get me Elle Rosen, Mossad, London.'

Beesely glanced at Otto, sat back and folded his arms.

'Hello?'

'Elle, Johno here, K2.'

'Ah, Johno, congratulations!'

'Sorry?'

'Excellent job yesterday, quite the hero.'

'Team effort. Listen, we're going to send you details of the Lebanese passports of the first two terrorists killed in Bavaria. Do me a favour, when you find out who they really are, see if there is a Russian connection with these men.'

Beesely glanced at Otto.

'Will, do, Johno. You rest yourself.'

He hung up, tossing the phone back to Beesely.

Beesely tipped his head forwards. 'Ten million pennies for your thoughts.'

Johno took in the view over the lake. 'Be easy enough to find some al-Qa'eda guys willing to do the martyrdom thing. Not so easy for them to approach a nuclear power station in the Ukraine and ask nicely for some radioactive ball bearings.'

Beesely considered it. 'So ... the ball bearings were ready *before* the drivers were contacted? Interesting.'

Two quiet shots rang out, quickly followed by another two. Unconcerned, Johno sipped his tea, Otto casually lifting his phone.

Beesely glanced from one face to the next, a concerned look. 'Was that gunfire?'

'Thomas,' Johno muttered as he tried some cake. 'Target practice.'

Beesely's eyebrows shot up. 'Here?'

Johno eased himself up, glancing down towards the lake. He sipped his tea. 'Going to need some more ducks. Otto, order some more ducks.'

'Christ, it's like the bleeding Adams Family,' Beesely muttered as he sat back and dialled. 'Get me Dame Helen.' He waited.

'Beesely, how are you? Read the papers?'

‘All of them. Seems to be contained.’

‘So far so good, lots of credit for my department and the SAS. Milward not happy - crates of champagne at the SAS barracks.’

Beesely laughed. ‘Just like after the Iranian Embassy Siege.’

‘Were you there?’

‘Yes, good old days. Listen, need all the forensics on that car and those two chaps.’

‘I’ll fax you what we have. But I have to be careful, you’re not supposed to exist.’

‘I’m sure the PM will understand, given what small part we played in their ... apprehension.’

‘He will, but there are a great many people not in the loop. Containment is proving hard.’

‘Listen, we’re at the old house, pop down tomorrow. You can sit and watch us heal.’

‘Will do, need to talk about Buck’ Palace on Friday.’

‘Buck’ Palace?’

‘Did they not contact you yet? PM has organized a private ceremony, an award for Johnno. It’s after the official ceremony for the pilot - rush job for the press - and the semi-official awards for the troopers, part of the cover story.’

Beesely glanced at Johnno. ‘We’ll chat tomorrow.’ He hung up. Easing back into the chair, he carefully studied Johnno. Ten minutes later a guard walked in with two telegrams; one for Beesely, one for Johnno. Beesely read his: *From H.M. the Queen, Buck. Palace. Well done. Your continued loyalty to this country is appreciated, in many quarters. E.R.*

‘I got a telegram from the Queen,’ Johnno stated with a heavy frown.

‘Really?’ Beesely asked, quickly pocketing his. ‘What does it say?’

‘Says ‘well done’, and be at the palace, 11am Friday.’ He frowned hard at it.

‘I know what that will be,’ Beesely began. ‘They are going to decorate that pilot –’

‘Peter? Good, he deserves it.’

‘And the navigator and the four SAS troopers. Cover story.’

Johnno nodded to himself as he thought. ‘Good. Read about it today. So far *we’re* in the clear.’

Beesely turned to Otto. ‘We’ll need formal morning wear. I have one, still upstairs. Need one for Johnno. Can’t take you inside, Otto, you would be difficult to explain. Besides, you’re always scruffy.’

Otto cocked an insulted Swiss eyebrow as Johnno chuckled.

* * *

A few hours later Johnno knocked on the door of a cottage in the village.

His ‘lady friend’ opened the door. ‘Johnno?’

‘Hey. How you doing?’

She stared back at him. ‘That’s the first time you’ve ever asked? What’s wrong? And what the hell happened to you?’ She stepped out and scanned the line of Range Rovers, drivers and guards stood near their vehicles.

‘Long story. Got the kettle on, love?’

She stepped back inside, holding the door, her gaze fixed on the Range Rovers.

Johnno limped into her lounge and sat. ‘I’d help, but I’m all busted up.’

She stopped and glanced down at him, then put the kettle on, returning and sitting opposite him. ‘So what the hell happened to you? Last we spoke you were off to Switzerland.’

‘We were in Switzerland for two weeks, then Bahamas, then back here for a bit of bother.’

‘Bit of bother?’ she queried, a concerned look.

‘Crashed a helicopter in London.’

Her features hardened. ‘Christ, Johnno,’ she whispered. ‘Aren’t you busted up enough already?’

He offered her a quick smile. ‘Good thing about being fucked-up ... is that there’s less good stuff to damage. It’s all second-hand!’

She gave him a disapproving look, shaking her head. ‘You’re not back on operations, are you?’

He shrugged apologetically. 'Oh,' he suddenly let out, remembering something. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a thick wad of fifties, handing it over.

'Christ, Johno. How much is here?'

'Five grand.'

'Five grand!' She raised her eyebrows in mock concern, putting her hands on her hips. 'What, exactly, did have in mind?' she teased.

He laughed. 'That's back-pay.'

'Back pay?'

'I've come into a lot of money, so that's for you. A gift, for ... helping me over the years.'

She examined it. 'A gift? Five grand?'

He shrugged. 'Like I said, I came into some money.'

'And you felt you wanted to ... what, thank me? Johno, we had a *working* arrangement.'

He gave her a coy smile. 'So that's danger money, for putting up with me. Get someone to fix the garden. And that squeaky bed.'

She handed it back to him. Their eyes met. Softly she said, 'If you hadn't always been such a drunken asshole it wouldn't have cost you anything. In case you hadn't noticed, I often slipped the money back into your jacket - you were too pissed to notice. You kept saying you won more on the horses than you thought, plonka!'

'Really?' He tried to remember back, staring downward. 'I want you to have it have anyway, I have more than I know what to do with.' His features hardened. 'And you *did* help.' He handed it back over.

'Well ... thank you, I guess. How ... how long you back for?'

'Couple a days, rest my leg.'

'I could make you something?' she offered.

He beamed a huge smile. 'Full English breakfast?'

'It's little late in the day,' she said as she stood. 'But just this once, seeing as you are being so generous.'

‘So what happened?’ she asked as they sat down in the lounge after his massive breakfast. She held a half-drunk cup of tea as Johno lit up.

‘As before, babes, not a word of this anywhere.’

‘I know the drill.’

He lowered his head as he thought, staring out at her overgrown garden. ‘Jane was killed.’

She straightened, horrified. ‘Jane? Christ! What happened?’

He held his gaze on the garden as he explained, ‘Short version? Some unhappy chappies stuck a bomb in our canteen in Switzerland, packed with nerve agent. She and six others got covered in the stuff, dead a minute or two later. Horrific way to go.’

‘My ... God.’

‘Beesely took it badly.’

‘I can image, she was with him as long as I’ve known them. She was with him when I left school!’

‘Twenty odd years.’ He made eye contact. ‘She was his daughter.’

‘His daughter? No ... she was his housekeeper.’

Johno took a long drag. ‘He kept it from her, in case the bad guys found out,’ he quietly explained. ‘Revealed it to her a few weeks back.’

‘God. And she was so frail!’

‘She always liked *you*,’ Johno mentioned, staring out of the window.

‘We used to gossip about *you*, that’s why. Always loved a good natter, she did.’

Johno nodded to himself. ‘After that we went psycho’ on the bad guys, killed dozens of the fuckers. Then off to the Bahamas for a holiday and all hell breaks loose back here with that dirty bomb.’ He faced her. ‘You don’t know about Ricky?’

‘No? What about Ricky?’

‘Dead.’

‘Dead?’ she gasped.

Johno nodded. ‘Trying to stop that dirty bomb.’

‘God,’ she gasped. ‘You and him were tied up with that?’

‘I crashed my chopper into the road in front of the terrorist’s car –’

‘That’s how you got hurt?’ she asked in a strained whisper.

He faced her. ‘I killed the drivers of that car in London, grabbed the bomb and flew off.’

‘*You* ... killed them?’ She was stunned.

‘We planted a cover story for the papers, keep me and Beesely out of it.’

‘Beesely?’

He gave her a pained look. ‘He was in the back of the fucking chopper.’

Her mouth hung open. ‘Is he alright?’

‘A few bruises, bit of a limp. Pop up the house if you want, say hello.’

‘Christ, Johno. You and him back working for –’

‘No,’ he quickly cut in. ‘Can’t really say what we’re into.’

She sipped her tea, quietly stunned.

‘Funny thing,’ Johno began. ‘When I grabbed that bomb I knew it was all over, and I didn’t really care, I was just focused on getting the job done.’

‘What job?’

‘Getting the bomb out of London. I threw the co-pilot out of an Army chopper, jumped in and forced the pilot to fly off at gunpoint. Plan was to fly the bomb out to the North Sea and then ditch the chopper. All over in a splash.’ He stared into his mug of tea.

‘So what happened?’ she quietly pressed.

Still staring into the mug he explained, ‘Had a long chat to the pilot, or he had one with me more like. He talked me around. I was going to drop him on a beach and fly out to my death.’ He took a drag and peered out the window. ‘Strange.’

‘Strange? It’s amazing!’

He faced her, a questioning look. ‘Amazing?’

‘What you did. You were prepared to give your own life to take the bomb out to sea.’

‘Been doing the work shit for a long time, love, brain was on autopilot. Didn’t give it any thought.’ He took a drag. ‘I don’t think I wanted to end it, not with the money we have now. Just wanted to get the job done.’

‘If you’ve got all this money, what the hell are you doing back on operations?’

‘Good ... question,’ he carefully mouthed. ‘But it’s not that kind of money. With *this* money comes responsibility. Beesely hasn’t long left, so he’s going to use it to bust up a few fuckers. Me, I’m along for the ride - see what happens.’

‘See what happens?’

He took a breath. ‘I shouldn’t be here –’

She checked her watch.

‘No, I mean, I should be dead - several times over. I’ve had my life, done a lot. Now Beesely wants to make a difference and I agree with him. May last a week or a year. But the way we’ve been going, more like a week.’ He offered her a smile, getting back a scowl.

‘I’m not working tonight,’ she ventured.

‘Can’t, war’s not over yet. But ... you know ... thanks for everything. Don’t know when we’ll be back this way. If ever.’ He stood.

She lifted up, placed down her tea and hugged him. ‘You take care.’

He touched her up and left.

* * *

Away from the house, walking around the lake, Otto dialled Minister Blaum.

‘Otto, my God, what has been happening?’

‘We intercepted a second dirty bomb, this one heading for London, as the first may well have been.’

‘Do you think it was al-Qa’eda?’

‘At the moment, all evidence points that way, Minister.’

‘My God. What do the British say?’

‘They must be delighted, but also concerned in just *how*... we intercepted the terrorist’s car.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I had a talk with Beesely in the Bahamas after we met with a group of Americans.’ Otto took in the beautiful lake.

‘And?’ Blaum asked after Otto paused.

‘It would appear that Beesely is a ... long standing and high ranking member of a secret American intelligence agency.’

‘Ah ... so now we know why the decontamination teams came so readily.’

‘And yesterday he made a phone call, the result of which was that a special USAF 747 flew over England and spotted the bomb in the terrorists car. The English intelligence services were ... surprised and perplexed at that.’

‘They did not know?’ Blaum queried.

‘Apparently not. And Minister, this American group are very, very powerful by all accounts.’

‘That is both a potential benefit, and a concern. Do you think they have their own agenda?’

‘Beesely does not trust them completely. He seems to be working on his own agenda, whatever that is.’

‘Any enquiries about...?’

‘None. No interest at all.’

‘That *is* odd.’

‘Should our ... friends get to know of Beesely’s position within this American group –’

‘They’d be as horrified as we should be. If the Americans got hold of the list...’

‘They will not, Minister. But they may prove to be very great allies.’

‘You are forgetting the link between the Americans and the Vatican.’

‘Then the question remains, how much influence Beesely has with them. From what I have observed so far his influence is great.’

‘Keep me informed.’

Otto pressed red and lowered the phone. ‘You know what you need to know, Minister. No more, no less.’

4

Dame Helen pulled up in a people-carrier with husband, two daughters and Cocker Spaniel in tow, observed from the conservatory. Johnno sat in t-shirt and shorts, his leg up. Otto

had on a short-sleeve shirt and tie, Beesely smart but casual for their visitors.

Beesely and Otto walked out and greeted Dame Helen's family on the gravel, bringing them inside to Johnno, the dog sprinting around the grounds. The conservatory was warm on this clear summer's day, two small fans now blowing cool air around, the leaves of numerous rubber plants swaying.

'So, how's the wounded hero?' she asked as she entered, sitting opposite Johnno and tucking her legs underneath herself. Today, her casual clothes, jeans and t-shirt, made her appear ten years younger and not unattractive.

'Sore. Managed to jar the knee in the same place I was shot in Kosovo,' Johnno explained.

She winced sympathetically. 'Ouch,' she quietly mouthed.

'Plus two broken ribs, a few cuts. Nothing serious. Like a night out in Newport nightclub.'

Her daughters walked in, her husband a hand on each of the girl's shoulders. Johnno raised his head.

'This is my husband, Mike. He's in marketing. And these two trouble-makers are Sophie and Tabitha.'

'How you doing girls, cold drink?'

'Please,' they politely said in unison, looking to Johnno to be around twelve years old.

He gestured for Mike to sit, studying him for a second. 'How much do you ... know?'

'What the paper's said, plus a few hints. Such as ... you didn't get those injuries in a Newport nightclub.'

Johnno lifted his eyebrows in mock concern. 'Have you ever been to Newport? You take your life in your hands. And that's just the women!'

Mike laughed. 'I had a sheltered upbringing.'

Johnno explained, 'Back when I was first *badged* - joined the SAS - we used to get the train down to Newport on a Saturday night. That's where that slogan comes from - 'Only the SAS go clubbing in Newport!''

Looking a little embarrassed, Mike answered, 'Can't say I've ever come across that one in marketing circles. Dare say that the Newport Tourist Board has not used that one either.'

Can't quite picture it on billboards as you drive over the Severn Bridge.'

Johno stared ahead. 'You've given me an idea, Mike.'

Thomas walked in with a large .22 air rifle, greeting everyone politely in his improving English. The girls caught his attention. He asked Johno, in whispered German, if he could show the girls how to shoot. The eldest girl, Sophie, answered him in German, linked arms and led him out as Beesely and Otto walked in, drinks in hand.

'Is that ... *wise*?' Beesely asked Johno, carefully observing the two children running towards the lake.

'There're no ducks left,' Johno pointed out with a smirk, immediately regretting it. Helen sat scowling.

'He shot the ducks with his air-rifle?' she asked.

'No, to be truthful,' Beesely answered, sorting the drinks.

'He got them with a 9mm automatic,' Johno pointed out, trying not to smile.

Otto added, dead pan, 'And the swans with an MP5.'

Beesely snapped his head around to Otto. 'The swans are dead?'

Otto nodded, tipping his head towards Johno. Dame Helen shook her head.

'She'll be fine,' Johno insisted.

'Not her I'm worried about,' Dame Helen admitted.

Mike cut in with, 'Knocked the boy next door cold the other week. Bit of a tomboy, that one.'

'I'm not!' the youngest proudly pointed out, sticking to her father's leg.

'Should be a challenge for him then,' Beesely offered as he placed a drink for Mike. 'Helen, why don't we walk and chat business for ten minutes, then we don't have to talk shop later.' They left, walking the grounds and keeping a careful eye on Thomas. The youngest daughter went exploring the old house.

'So, Mike,' Johno began. 'What's it like being married to 'M'?''

Mike gave it a moment's thought. 'Taking the kids to school, picking them up, stopping them fighting, balancing the bills, fixing the house, doing the dishes.'

‘That good, eh? Can she cook?’

‘Oh, yes, pretty good. Sunday roast is always great, Christmas and the like.’

‘Well, we know where to come next year.’

Mike adopted a serious stare, taking a long, deep breath. ‘How close did we come?’

Johnno regarded him carefully for a moment. ‘Ten minutes or so.’

He held his stare on Johnno. ‘Not much of a margin.’

‘Still, would only have been Elephant and Castle uninhabitable for a thousand years,’ Johnno quipped.

‘So, no change there then,’ Mike joked. Then again serious he added, glancing out of the windows, ‘The girls were in music study that day, near Blackheath.’

Johnno glanced at Otto, who had now lifted his head out of his newspaper.

Mike added, looking at his feet, ‘All the time she was at Chequers ... and ... those reports were coming in ... Blackheath this, Blackheath that. I know she had a good cry afterwards, don’t know how she kept it together. Terrible wreck when she got home, she didn’t stop hugging the kids for an hour. I went to fetch them early but couldn’t get close because of all the roadblocks.’ He raised his head. ‘Thank God for mobile phones, eh. Must have rung them fifty times.’ He glanced at the lake, taking a moment. ‘She’s a bit more fond of you lot now, I dare say.’ As he took his drink his hand was shaking, carefully observed by Johnno and Otto.

Beesely and Dame Helen walked at a leisurely pace, around the old house and towards the woods.

‘If it *is* Russian backed then things might get hairy,’ he calmly pointed out.

‘Well ... have kind of a *request* for you.’

‘Oh dear, not sure I like the sound of that.’

‘PM had a chat with his European colleagues. We don’t want to rock the boat too much —’

He stopped. ‘It was a radioactive dirty bomb, possibly tracking straight back to the Russians!’

‘We have not confirmed that, and the terrorists are Mid’ East, not Russian. That makes it difficult –’

‘Because of the new gas pipeline into Europe and the bloody Europeans putting pressure on the PM! Yes?’

She turned away, taking in the pleasant grounds. ‘You might think that, I could not possibly comment.’

Beesely took a deep breath then walked on. ‘So, I guess they want me to *aggressively* investigate and ... and then deal with the participants as best I can with *plausible deniability*.’

‘Something like that, although I’m not really allowed to give you any direct requests. But ... there may have been an email to you today. List of ... persons to consider.’

‘Very well, I would have retaliated in any case. They killed Ricky, so someone will pay dearly. We are presently trying to track down the man who tipped us off originally.’

‘How did he know to call your people in Switzerland?’ she puzzled.

‘He didn’t, he called Interpol - a phone number in the back of a local Ukraine newspaper, inviting people to report serious crime, paid for by the European Union as part of some initiative with the Ukraine Government. And we intercept everything Interpol does.’

‘Going to pretend I didn’t hear that.’

He glanced at her as they walked on. ‘When the time comes I will probably ask for some pressure to be exerted on the Ukraine Government.’

‘PM has spoken to them, complete denial, they’re being as helpful as they can. Germans love them to bits, so tricky.’

‘Germans owe me. I’ll bring some pressure to bear, and financially.’

‘Financially?’

‘I could destroy the Ukraine economy,’ he snarled. She looked sceptical. He smiled sadistically. ‘Did you see the trading volumes brought to bear on the stock markets? I have an influence over twenty five percent of the world’s stock buyers. Something else you don’t know about.’

‘We don’t want the Ukraine Government toppled.’ She stopped and faced him. ‘That’s official.’

‘How about just ... *ruffled*?’

‘It’s your call, but be careful.’

‘Mossad is working an angle for me, an idea that Johnno came up with. If he’s right, PM won’t have much of a choice. And if you lot want me to go toe-to-toe with Moscow then there will be favours asked. Large ones.’ He stopped. Raising his voice he said, ‘I lost Ricky, Jane, nearly lost us all a few days ago. Be sure of what you are asking me to do, there will be bloodshed!’

She lowered her head as if a naughty schoolgirl. A moment passed. She sighed, stating, ‘We’ll support you any way that is practical.’

‘Fine. First request ... nay ... first insistence. I want two four-man SAS teams, best you have, two officers and their kit encamped with me.’

‘And any action will be outside of the UK?’

‘Unfortunately, it’s likely to be on my bloody doorstep in Switzerland. But also East Europe.’

They walked on towards the lake, suddenly stopping dead.

‘Did he just kiss her?’ she asked.

‘Madam, I think the little lady just kissed *him*.’

‘God, she’s a handful!’

They walked briskly across.

‘Wait until she starts dating bikers!’

5

As Dame Helen drove off, Beesely joined Otto and Johnno in the conservatory. ‘Brandy!’ he barked at a guard.

Otto looked up. ‘Problems?’

Beesely sat, clearly not pleased.

‘What’s up?’ Johnno asked, concerned.

‘What’s up, my boy, is that if you are right in your theory about how this all got started, the British Government and European Union does not want to upset Moscow. They have an energy problem and a European gas pipeline to consider.’

‘They nearly lost London for fuck’s sake!’ Johnno pointed out.

‘Nearly, but did not. And they still need energy. And probably some quarters happy to see Mid’ East terrorists

blamed. If we are going to deal with those behind it we are on our own.'

'On our own,' Johno repeated. 'Up against the FSB?'

'I do not believe it was the Russian Government,' Otto began, as detached and emotionless as normal. 'Their economy would reduce to zero if London was destroyed. They have a very heavy investment in the European gas pipeline and the UK stock markets. They want their customers alive, not dead.'

'There is a lot of sense to that,' Beesely agreed. 'So we investigate and see where it takes us. To whom.'

'And we investigate aggressively?' Johno pointedly enquired.

Beesely offered him a concerned look. 'Very!' He turned to Otto. 'I want security on this place doubled, personal security on us all increased, and permanent state of alert at our offices until I say so.'

Otto eased upright and grabbed his phone. 'From what direction should we assume trouble?'

'East, for now,' Beesely suggested.

After his brandy, and time to cool down, Beesely grabbed his phone. 'Get me Elle Rosen, Mossad.' He waited.

'Beesely?'

'Elle, listen, no time for pleasantries - day after tomorrow, 6pm, Zug. I need you and a senior decision maker, government level.'

'Problems, my friend?'

'Big problems.'

'We will be there. And Beesely, some day you just call me to say 'hi' ... eh?'

Beesely hung up, smiling. 'Get me Olly Stanton.' He waited. Otto leant forwards, concerned.

'Beesely? Olly here, you damn well went and woke me.'

'Sorry, but problems. I want a senior decision make at my place in Zug for 6pm day after tomorrow.'

'Why is the sound of that going to keep me awake?'

'It should.'

'I'm coming over myself.'

‘Always welcome.’ Beesely hung up then turned to Otto. ‘I want a representative of the Swiss bank society, their spokesman, and Minister Blaum at Zug for 6pm.’

Otto sat quickly upright, grabbing his phone.

‘Pin out of the grenade?’ Johno asked, taking a long drag.

‘With us holding it!’ Beesely answered, making strong eye contact. Turning the other way he said, ‘Otto, I want all intel’ and leads followed up by twelve noon day after tomorrow, all British and German forensics.’

6

‘What’s up, Doc?’

Dr. Manning was offered a seat in the warm conservatory by a guard, seating himself opposite Johno, who now sat with his leg up, Simpsons Family silk shorts and a t-shirt that announced, ‘Only the SAS go clubbing in Newport!’

‘Johno, you look ... injured. Again.’ He placed down his faded leather bag.

‘Spot of bother with a helicopter. Tea?’ Johno asked, the guard hovering.

‘Please.’

Johno glanced up, the guard walking out immediately.

Manning took in the conservatory. ‘This is the first time I’ve been back here for most twenty years. Surprised you got planning permission for this conservatory, what with the listed building status. It’s not exactly tucked away.’

Johno offered him a wide, confident, sneaky grin.

Dr. Manning squinted. ‘Something you’re not telling me?’

‘Beesely didn’t just inherit a Swiss bank, he inherited one of the world’s largest, and most capable, private intelligence agencies. We do the fuck what we like.’

‘Sounds ... dangerous, Johno,’ Manning offered in disapproving tones.

‘There you go, always concerned about my health.’

‘Well you are, after all, my patient.’

Johno made a face. ‘Never liked that word. From now on I’m your mate, OK?’

‘If that’s what you prefer.’ Dr. Manning took in the conservatory, Johnno’s injuries and the rather large K2 guards patrolling with dogs and guns. ‘Beesely not here? In Switzerland?’

‘Up the road, be back anytime.’

‘So, you had an accident? Same leg, if I recall.’

‘You do recall, and yes, it hurts like fuck. Twisted it where I was shot, couple a busted ribs, few cuts. Nothing much.’

‘Nothing much *to you* perhaps. Remember those chats we had about the value of you own self worth.’

‘Sorry, Doc’, but you’re not here to go all psycho’ babble.’

Manning was puzzled. ‘Then why did you call me?’

‘Got some space and buildings in Switzerland, been thinking. I’m going to open up a clinic over there for ex-soldiers and spooks. You see, getting away from here, the UK, seems to work for me, and over there I’ve resources which I can use, especially in the summer. You see, the way I figure it, most people like me are miserable because they think they’ve lost some ... potential future. If they get it back, they’re cured.’

‘Quite insightful, Johnno. Picked up a book ... have we?’

Johnno grinned. ‘Not for a long time.’ Three Range Rovers pulled up on the gravel. ‘Family is back,’ Johnno quietly stated.

‘Family?’ Manning repeated, back in character. ‘You see Beesely as family now?’

Johnno smiled and wagged a finger. ‘Time for some surprises.’

Dr. Manning stood as Beesely, Otto and Thomas walked in.

‘Doc’ Manning?’ Beesely said with a welcoming smile and a slight frown. They shook.

‘The *patient* called me,’ Manning explained. ‘How are you?’ He stopped smiling when he noticed the cuts. ‘Christ, you weren’t in the same helicopter crash, were you?’

They all sat, Thomas stood next to Johnno and studying Dr. Manning.

‘Afraid so,’ Beesely announced. ‘Good to see Johnno is keeping up his chats with you.’

‘He isn’t, exactly,’ Manning replied.

Beesely faced Johnno. ‘Oh?’

Johnno explained, 'I'm going to open a clinic in Switzerland for ex-soldiers. Nutcases like me.'

Beesely stopped smiling, took a breath and lowered his head for a moment. 'An excellent idea,' he quietly commended.

'Doc' Manning here is the only head shrink I know, so he can advise, or help if he wants.' He gestured toward Otto. 'The smartly dressed good-looking young fella over there is Otto, head of our Swiss operations. And this monster is my adopted son.'

'You adopted?' Dr. Manning repeated, wide eyed.

'We all did,' Beesely pointed out. 'No need to worry or call child services, we don't leave the boy completely in Johnno's care.' Beesely faced the psychiatrist squarely. 'Has he told you ... anything?'

Manning tipped his head. 'About?'

Beesely faced Johnno. 'Did you say anything?'

'Some about the Swiss money and K2, very little.'

'Perhaps you should fill him in then,' Beesely suggested as drinks were placed down for him and Otto.

Johnno took a breath. 'You seen the news, about the dirty bomb in Blackheath?'

Manning studied him for a moment before glancing at Beesely. 'Yes, could hardly miss it.'

Johnno explained, 'We, us four, were in that chopper, not MI6 or the SAS, they got there late. I tried to ram the terrorist car with our chopper.'

Manning glanced at Beesely, who nodded. 'What the hell are you back into Morris?'

'Everything. I don't have long left, so to hell with it all. We ... are going to make a difference.'

'Dear God, Morris -'

Beesely held up a hand, 'I know, I'm almost eighty. But what worth is my last few years sat on a beach?'

'There's more,' Johnno said with a grin, enjoying the doctor's expression. 'He's my real father.'

Manning faced Beesely, who again nodded. 'Well, that explains a hell of a lot all in one go.' He blew out. 'Bloody hell.'

‘And me,’ Otto said with a wave.

‘And you? You’re Swiss!’

‘Gets about a bit does our Morris,’ Johno quipped.

Beesely shot Johno a look then took a breath. ‘So was Jane,’ he quietly stated.

‘Was ... Jane?’

‘She’s dead,’ Beesely explained.

‘Sorry to hear that, Morris. Are you OK?’

‘Never better, strangely enough.’

‘Was it ... an accident?’ Manning delicately broached.

‘No, murdered ... with nerve gas, at our place in Switzerland,’ Beesely answered.

‘What? Are you joking?’ Manning asked, a worried look for Beesely. ‘What the hell are you into, Morris?’

‘Hell ... is *exactly* what we are into, Doctor,’ Beesely firmly pointed out.

Manning took a breath, shaking his head. ‘So, what is that you want from me?’

‘Best ask my son,’ Beesely pointed out. ‘I never knew you were here.’ Manning faced Johno.

Johno explained, ‘Like I said, I’m going to open up a place in Switzerland, fly ex-soldiers over there, give them something practical to focus on. So if it’s OK with you, Doc’, I’ll give you a call when we’re back, send a Learjet for you. Same as you’ve been doing here, just over there. And, without trying to step on your toes, I’m going to try some of my techniques on the guys.’

Manning sighed. ‘With some of the people I’ve found, radical programmes are all that is left to try. Picked up quite a few sleeping rough.’

‘What?’ Beesely barked.

Manning faced him. ‘Sizeable small fraction of ex-servicemen in hostels or on the streets in the UK, I’m afraid. Some estimates say that fifteen percent of *all* homeless are ex-services.’

‘Find them,’ Beesely firmly ordered. ‘Money is no object. Send them over to us, we’ll clean them up.’

Back in his office, later that day, Dr. Manning was surprised to find General Rose in the doorway. 'General?'

'Doc'. Long time no see.'

Manning eased back. 'And you're here just after I get back from a session with Johnno.'

General Rose sat. 'So ... how is he?'

'Is that a *professional* interest, or a ... *breach of client confidentiality* interest?'

'Just a general interest, Doc.' He waited, drilling the doctor with a strong glare.

Manning interlaced his fingers, resting his arms on the desk. Attempting to look sincere, he asked, 'Tell me about your fondest childhood memory.'

General Rose frowned. 'What?' Then he smiled, letting out a quick laugh.

Manning smiled back. 'Sorry. Couldn't resist that one, you sat in that chair.'

General Rose laughed again. 'So, how is ... our boy?'

'The hero? Johnno? That boy? The man who rammed a helicopter into a terrorist's car with everyone who matters to him sat in the back?'

General Rose checked his nails for several seconds. Finally he made firm eye contact. 'Are you saying that you'll not co-operate with us?' he quietly posed.

'Co-operate?' On what, exactly?'

'It's just ... that in my position I'm interested in matters that involve people who ram helicopters into terrorist's cars.'

Manning offered him an exaggerated frown. 'Why not ask Johnno directly?'

General Rose sighed, irritated. 'If Johnno said anything that is of interest to national security —'

'I'd tell the relevant authorities. And, just for the record, who is that? Given that you don't *officially* exist.'

General Rose stared back. 'Did you see Beesely?'

'Quick hello as I left. Like I said, a session with Johnno, which are always strange at the best of times.'

'So, he didn't happen to say how he knew about that car?'

'Americans told them, I think.'

General Rose straightened. 'Americans?' Manning nodded. General Rose looked quite put out. 'What else?'

'I have to be very careful, as you know. But, if there was something I thought you should know ... you'd know.'

General Rose sighed and stood. 'You have my number. Oh, what's this new work you've started. Ex-servicemen?'

'I donate my time on weekends to a few charities. We lookout for ex-service amongst the cardboard sleeping bags, see if we can help.' He stood. 'Care to contribute?'

'Christmas.'

'What?' Manning queried.

'My fondest childhood memory. Christmas.' He turned and left.

A strange new feeling

1

‘Nervous?’ Beesely asked as they stood outside the reception hall, a butler stood ready to open the large doors when they were called.

Johnno adjusted his waistcoat. ‘Why?’

‘It’s the Queen. You’ve never been inside before.’

‘If the dogs bite me, they’ll be trouble,’ he whispered.

‘If you make any trouble in *there*, I’ll bite you!’ Beesely threatened.

‘OK, keep your knickers on,’ Johnno whispered.

The K2 photographer stood ready, already having snapped them at the house, outside the palace and stood together inside. The doors clicked opened.

‘Gentlemen, if you please,’ the Queen’s houseman called.

‘Follow me, but two steps ahead of me,’ Beesely whispered.

Johnno quickly quizzed him with a look before stepping inside. Lining the sides of this large room were two hundred people. ‘Oh ... shit,’ he muttered.

He could see uniformed officers from all branches of the armed services, huge braids signifying high rank - many holding ceremonial swords, ladies in ‘race-day’ hats, men in morning wear and grey top hats. With a deep breath he limped slowly toward the Queen, who stood waiting some twenty yards ahead, catching Beesely out of the corner of his eye. Then they began to clap.

‘Oh ... shit.’ He limped slowly forward.

There stood Dame Helen and her assistant Willis. He recognised the Home Secretary and Defence Minister, a few other politicians, many men in suits; no idea who they were. Then the Prime Minister, looking very business-like. With his head down, smiling politely, Johnno limped on.

Then he noticed Burke, CIA, smartly dressed, some men next to him with small American flag badges on their lapels. Minister Blaum came as a surprise. Then came some foreign

looking gentlemen; no idea who they were, or what they knew, but they were all clapping.

Lynx pilot Peter Raines, stood in No.1 dress uniform, smiled widely and clapped loudly. His navigator stood at his shoulder, big bruise on his chin. Johnno forced a quick smile for the man, looking apologetic. He made eye contact with Sgt Mason and the SAS troopers from the Lynx, all in No. 1 dress uniform today, all sporting medals and grinning. Milward and his staff, not looking too enthusiastic about today's event, looked on. Some high-ranking police officers stood behind them, more army officers; Navy, RAF, all sorts thrown in.

Finally he reached the Queen, the clapping subsiding, the Queen stood in formal attire next to a table.

'Ma'am,' he coughed out. His face remained bruised, scars and stitches visible, but the 'face fungus' had been trimmed

She waited for the room to fall silent, then made eye contact and indicated he should kneel.

'Apologies, Ma'am, but I can hardly walk, let alone kneel and get back up.'

'That is quite alright, Mister Williams. Do you require a chair?'

'No, Ma'am.'

She lifted her head and glanced over his shoulder, Johnno following her look, finding Beesely waiting back near the door. 'Sneaky bastard', he muttered.

'We are here today ... to honour someone who showed exceptional insight, bravery ... and concern for his fellow man. Sergeant John Williams - known as 'Johnno' - formerly of the 22nd Special Air Service Regiment, deliberately crashed a helicopter into the path of a terrorist vehicle when he suspected that it was the vehicle carrying a bomb towards the heart of our capital. With no regard for his own safety, *or those around him*, his only aim was to stop the terrorists, which he did in the gun battle that followed.

'What came next was remarkable in its humanity. Sergeant Williams carried the bomb to a waiting Army helicopter, who's aircrew - I understand - were not so delighted at the prospect of the bomb aboard their aircraft. He stopped the other soldiers from climbing aboard, as they had intended. He

ejected the aircraft's navigator and *persuaded* the pilot to fly quickly off.

'It was Sergeant Williams' intention to fly on alone, into the North Sea and let the helicopter pilot jump to safety whilst he made sure the bomb found its way to the bottom of the North Sea.

'Injured, and unable to control the aircraft, Sergeant Williams was dropped-off on a Norfolk beach, the pilot flying on and ditching a safe distance off the coast.'

She turned to the table and lifted up a box. Opening it she turned back to him, stepping closer and pinning the medal onto his jacket. 'For conspicuous bravery in your previous military career – belatedly, and after much research - you are hereby awarded the Distinguished Service Medal.'

Surprised, Johnno lowered his head. 'Thank you, Ma'am.'

She took another medal. 'In addition to which we are also awarding you the George Cross for services whilst serving with Military Intelligence.' She pinned it.

'Thank you, Ma'am,' he said with a puzzled look.

'And for services to your country, it gives me great pleasure to award you the highest honour we have for servicemen, past and present, the Victoria Cross.' Polite applause swept around the room, a camera flashed. She half turned. 'Mister Ambassador.'

The man walked forwards, ribbons in hand. 'Sergeant Williams, for services to NATO,' he began in an American accent, 'and with grateful appreciation of the Office of The President of The United States, you are hereby awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Well done.' They shook hands, a camera flashing.

'Thanks,' Johnno offered, now bewildered.

She beckoned Beesely forward as Johnno turned, grinning at the troopers and pilots. Beesely limped level and the Queen closed to a confidential distance.

'I have been following your career for quite some time,' she informed Johnno. 'In fact, since the day you were born.' Johnno's eyes widened. 'Sir Morris kept me quite up-to-date with your ... *exploits* over the years.' Johnno glanced at the smirking Beesely. She continued, 'I knew when you joined the

army, the SAS and when you were lost in Kosovo. And Sir Morris and I both had sons in the Falklands.'

She turned to Beesely. 'Now you, you old rascal, have never ceased to surprise me over the past sixty years. I was amazed when I heard this story. In fact, I thought it a joke given how old you are now - chasing terrorists in helicopters, gun battles, radioactive bombs. And now I am reliably informed that you have some secret Swiss Intelligence company that no one knew about, least of all me, and that you propped up the UK stock markets this week.'

'One does ones best, Ma'am.'

'You, sir, have always managed to make 'Ma'am' mean a myriad of different things. I can never tell if you are being facetious.'

'Yes. Ma'am,' he joked.

'Hmmm.' She gestured towards a door, 'The reception party,' then led the way.

* * *

'Sorry about the chin,' Johno offered, shaking hands with the navigator.

The navigator forced a quick flat smile, seeming a little embarrassed. 'This is my wife, and our eldest Sarah.'

Johno smiled awkwardly at the navigator's wife.

She shook his hand. 'Thanks for what you did,' she said, suddenly becoming serious. 'If he had flown off with that bomb he might not be here today.'

Awkwardly, Johno replied, 'Brain was on auto-pilot, love.' Next came the Pilot, Peter.

'Hey buddy,' Peter quietly let out as they shook, a warm and welcoming smile.

'Got yourself a medal,' Johno noted as Peter's wife inched closer.

'Real one. DFC,' the pilot responded.

'You deserve it, mate, flying that bomb out to sea.'

Peter raised his eyebrows, mockingly. 'I had a little *persuasion*. And thanks for the ... *bag*. How the hell can *you* afford that?'

Johnno eased his face closer, a quick glance left and right. 'Very, very rich patron.'

Peter glanced at Beesely. 'I've heard rumours,' he whispered.

Next Johnno stopped in front of Dame Helen. 'Watcha babes? You scrub up well,' he offered with a smirk. She gave him a disappointed, motherly look. He shook hands with her and a grinning Willis.

Johnno stopped next to General Sir Christopher Rose, stood now in a civilian suit. 'General, how nice to see your wrinkly features again after all these years.' They shook.

'Well done,' the General coldly offered. 'Anything ... to report?'

'The local apple strudel is lovely. Try some. As for the other matter ... not a sausage. Not even a hint of a sausage, nor smell of one. In fact, you could say the whole place is sausage free. And, if you threw a sausage up the wrong tree whilst observing a pack of hungry dogs they'd be ... you know ... barking up the wrong fucking tree.' He walked on, General Rose staring at the back of his head with a heavy frown.

Beesely stepped up to the General. 'Ah, General Rose. Been a while.'

'How are you, Sir Morris? Besides the obvious injuries, of course.'

'A bit too old for all this, I'm afraid. But, I still know where my *loyalties* lie, where my *heart* is. And my *sense of duty* ... is just as great as it ever was.' With a cheeky smile and a theatrical wink he stepped away, leaving General Rose now frowning heavily at the back of Beesely's head.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' Beesely called ten minutes later. 'Ladies and gentlemen.'

Most of the guests were surprised, especially the Queen, thinking it some impromptu toast. They quietened down and adjusted their positions as four butlers walked in with large display boards.

'I have a presentation to make, and I also have some favours to ask.'

‘Oh dear,’ the Queen whispered toward the PM.

The boards were laid out. The first showed a tree-diagram of some sort, the rest cartoon-style graphics of what appeared soldiers in white uniforms.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, I am about to start a new project, although I have left it a little late. For this project I desire Royal patronage, the kind co-operation of the British Government, the international co-operation of the Swiss Government, plus the kind assistance of the British Army, Air Force and Navy.’

He had them all intrigued, and many concerned. The people mentioned stepped closer to the boards, the Queen still looking a little irate at the cheek of it.

‘I am going to found an international rescue service, of mostly volunteers, but with a strong leaning towards ex-military medically trained staff. This organization will aim to have a thousand staff, all trained to a very high degree in a variety of subjects.

‘The purpose? Following a disaster somewhere around the world I want to be able to deliver up to one thousand well-equipped, well trained, rescue medics within twenty four hours.’

There were a few gasps from those who understood the logistics.

‘I aim to open training camps in several countries, starting with the UK and Switzerland. Those camps will make use of the wealth of unemployed talent amongst our young people - paying them, and training them, in a variety of subjects, not least how to be good citizens.

‘I will supply this force with aircraft and helicopters, plus the equipment they need. They will be trained in survival, first aid, search and rescue, fire fighting, bush fire fighting, flood assistance and foreign languages. I will also have a parachute force that can land people anywhere in the world, even in the most inhospitable of places.

‘For this endeavour I will gratefully accept the part-time patronage of retired or senior military, police or fire brigade officers.’ Men glanced at each other, nodding. ‘I will also accept any kind assistance from any suitable persons who wish

to contribute. This organization will be set up as a charity, with a board, and will be answerable to that board as well as to the laws and procedures of whichever country they are in. There are displays here, outlining the proposal, and you can also contact me via the Swiss branch of the International Red Cross. Thank you for your time.'

The crowd started to clap politely.

Minister Blaum walked up and stated, in a loud voice, 'You shall have the full co-operation of the Swiss Government and Swiss Red Cross.' They shook.

An Air Force officer had been stood close by and stepped up. 'I'm retiring in a few months and you'll have my complete support, whatever time you need.'

Army officers made similar moves, the Prime Minister stepping up. 'Sir Morris, I will study the proposal with great interest, and you have my support in principal.' They shook.

Beesely turned to the Queen, a question in his expression.

'Like you, Sir Morris, I am not so young. I think maybe Charles or William may better suit your needs. Especially William.'

He bowed. 'All help gratefully accepted. Ma'am.'

She offered him a mildly scolding look.

2

The next day Beesely's helicopter landed on a disused airfield near Swindon, on its dilapidated runway, weeds growing out of cracks in the tarmac. Several caravans stood parked in a row beside two yellow Portacabins.

As they stepped down from the helicopter men walked forwards, builders hard hats held down against the helicopter's wash. With heads bent low Beesely and company walked towards the men as the helicopter's engines quickly wound down.

'Morning, sir,' the first builder said with a handshake.

'How's it looking?' Beesely asked.

The builder pointed towards hangars and barrack rooms some three hundred yards away. 'Still have water in the buildings and hangars, no problem there, sir. Electricity will be

up in a day or so, gas turned back on when we need it. They're doing site surveys now.'

'Are the buildings all useable?' Beesely asked.

'Yes, sir, good condition structurally. Hangars are built to last as well.' Otto and Johno took in the scene.

Beesely turned towards the runway. 'That needs to be fixed to acceptable standards for a C130 to land on, maybe a C5 Galaxy.'

'Tricky, sir, but we have the architects coming down in a day or so.'

Beesely put his hands on his hips, turning the other way. 'Right, perimeter fence: half decent, but not Colditz. Gate house fixed up, twenty four hour security. What are those houses over there?'

'They were married quarters in the fifties, sir. Government was going to sell the land to a developer.'

'Are they salvageable?'

'Got asbestos in them, loads of it.'

Beesely straightened and sighed. 'OK, pull them down,' he softly ordered. Then louder, 'But I want houses for maybe twenty permanent staff, flats for another fifty visitors, the rest sleep in the barracks. They're being trained to go up jungle, not be comfortable.'

He turned. 'Right. Here —' He pointed with both arms. '— four hundred yard assault course, the toughest in the world. Make it a bitch. I want the Army asking us for favours, sending their boys here. Far corner, parachute school. And a large muddy pond, deep enough for rowing or swimming across, say a hundred yards.'

They walked towards the hangars. 'In the hangars we need an indoor assault course, lots of ropes and climbing gear. I want a climbing wall or two, a few crashed airliners on the airfield to practice body recovery.'

'Going to need some lecture halls,' Johno suggested. 'Surgical bays and a freezer for dead stuff.'

Beesely turned his head. 'Dead stuff?'

'Can't teach field surgery without dead stuff. And dead people.'

'Best get some pigs as well,' Beesely suggested.

‘Pigs?’ the man asked.

‘Field medics shoot or stab them, then practice stitching them up,’ Johno explained.

An Army Land-Rover drove onto the airfield and towards them. Two minutes later an officer stepped out. ‘Anyone call for the Army,’ the man joked.

‘Who are you?’ Beesely enquired, shaking the officer’s hand.

‘Engineers, sir. Advance party. Got a battalion arriving Monday.’

Beesely glanced towards Johno.

‘Nice to have friends in high places,’ Johno commented. ‘What did this used to be, it seems familiar?’

‘Well, if you did a parachute course at RAF Brize Norton in the seventies or eighties it might. There used to be a balloon jump school here.’

‘Fuck, I knew I recognised it.’

‘And with a handsome moustache like that I can picture you here.’

3

It neared 11a.m. the following day when they arrived at the gates to Zug compound, Beesely asking the driver to stop when they were a hundred yards inside the main gate.

‘Johno, be so kind as to step out,’ Beesely instructed.

‘What? Why?’

‘The staff wish to show their respects, they are lined up waiting.’

‘Oh?’ He gave it some thought, reluctantly stepping down. ‘God’s sake,’ he muttered. The convoy drove on, through the crowds and stopping at the castle.

Johno lit up, took a long drag, then began labouring slowly up the camp road. Guards stood smiling and waving, some making rude comments. He exchanged words with a few he knew, trudging slowly onwards, his leg hurting.

As he neared the castle the crowds began, lining the road three or four deep, many with cameras in hand. Then they began clapping. Pleased at the number of ladies in the crowd

he smiled politely back, noting many new faces. When he reached a group of guards he knew well he gave them a regal wave, a few rude comments coming back.

The road was now blocked by the ex-SAS contingent, all holding champagne bottles. 'Oh well, didn't want this suit anyway', he muttered.

As he stepped up to them they closed in, the crowd blocking any escape to the rear, not that his leg and ribs would have allowed him to run or fight his way through. The first cork 'popped', the signal to the rest to shake, pop and spay.

'Bastards,' he let out as they closed in, showering him with champagne.

The crowd cheered, cameras flashing from all sides. Then the first bag of flour went over his head. Then another, some ketchup, followed up by sugar and a large dollop of margarine rubbed in.

The crowd cheered more, flashing away with their cameras, until Johno became one big sticky blob of white. Clearing the various foodstuffs out of his eyes he walked on, Beesely and Otto waiting ahead.

'You're not going inside like that!' Beesely insisted in a quiet yet threatening tone. 'Take it off, right here.'

As guards laughed at him Johno began to strip, more cameras flashing. Down to his shirt and underpants and with his head wiped he walked in.

'Call over the SAS,' Beesely told Otto.

Otto went and fetched them, the men lining up in front of Beesely, still smiling but expecting some sort of rebuke.

'Right, gentlemen. For what happened in Malvern, would anyone care to tell me just why I should not punish you?' Silence. They looked at their boots. Beesely stepped closer. 'You buried Ricky upside down!' he barked. 'And at an angle, I understand!' Furthermore, some idiot burnt down the marquee –'

'Not us,' one started to protest.

'Shut up!'

'Sir.'

‘And as for the damage to the hotel ... you screw-ups represent me, and K2, when you are away from here. I expect you to set an example.’

He patrolled along the length of the line. ‘For the damage to the hotel, which I know you were involved with, docked one week’s pay. For burying Ricky upside down you will clean out the pig pen each morning at 6am and each night at 7pm for the rest of this week.’ The men groaned. Beesely turned to Otto. ‘Have you fed the pigs Chicken Vindaloo?’ The troopers looked up.

‘Yes,’ Otto said with a nod.

‘And mixed in a laxative?’ Beesely enquired.

‘Yes.’

They cringed.

‘Shut up! Now fuck off, before I really punish you.’

Aftermath

1

At twelve-noon the meeting came to order, all managers sat facing Beesely, their deputies nestled in behind them.

Beesely waited for them to settle. 'So, this meeting is to recap and collate all we know about what happened.' Beesely took out his pen. 'What do we know about the drivers of the vehicles?'

The relevant manager eased forwards. 'Their passports were genuine. They were Jordanian for the vehicle stopped in Bavaria, but Lebanese-Palestinians for the vehicle stopped in London.'

'Any links to known terrorist groups?'

'None at all, sir. We have checked with Mossad.'

Beesely considered it. 'So, they were picked for the fact that they had clean records and a straight passport. What visa stamps were on their passports?'

'None had any Russian visa stamps, or even Ukraine - prior to them getting the bomb - but all had visited Turkey on the same date. Istanbul.'

Beesely turned to Mole. 'And from Istanbul to the Ukraine?'

'A boat journey, or a short flight. Not long.'

Beesely nodded to himself. 'That does not mean that they took that journey, but they could have met someone there. Try and get the hotel records for those dates, see who else stayed there and cross match.'

'It is in progress,' Otto stated.

'The vehicles themselves?'

Another manager tipped his head forwards. 'Bought second-hand in Kiev, sir.'

'Not in the east?'

'No, sir.'

'So, whoever bought them may have flown in. Do we have dates?'

'Yes, sir. Three weeks before they crossed into Hungary.'

‘Three weeks is a long time to be hanging around, they must have left a big footprint,’ Beesely suggested.

‘No, sir,’ Herr Mole stated. ‘They stayed with someone, no hotels were used.’

‘And that someone?’ Beesely pressed.

Herr Mole replied, ‘Unknown at the moment, but a Ukraine national most likely. The vehicles were bought by a native, not a foreigner.’

‘So they had help. And the cars went from Kiev to the east, picked up the ball bearings and drove back. Quite a journey, probably stopped by the police and asked for money. Let’s bribe who we need to in the Ukraine police along the route they would have most likely taken.’

Managers made notes.

‘Any visits by the drivers to Iraq, Syria or Pakistan?’ Beesely asked of the assembled managers.

‘Nothing on their passports, sir.’

‘The Jordanians may co-operate on talking to the families,’ Beesely suggested. ‘I’ll ask the British Government to put pressure on them to do so.’

Herr Mole put in, ‘I have the English language versions of several Jordanian newspapers, I have been monitoring them. The police in Jordan have spoken to the families. The only point of interest is that they both lost sons who went to fight in Iraq.’

‘A very big point of interest indeed!’

‘Yes, sir.’

Beesely eased back. ‘So, we have Ukraine cars, local assistance, Ukraine ball bearings, Jordanian and Lebanese martyrs ... and we don’t know who thought it all up. What has the man who tipped us off said?’

Otto answered, ‘He says that the man who paid him was Georgian. Beyond that he was not much help. He alone prepared the ball bearings, they are used as part of an internal mechanism and so naturally radioactive. It was his job to safely dispose of them twice a year, buried in concrete.’

‘So, no one would miss them. Clever!’

Herr Mole offered, ‘The name used by the Georgian buyer is more common for Chechens.’

‘That would make more sense. They have a border near the Ukraine and easy access to Turkey. Start bribing people in Georgia and Chechnya, maximum speed. We need answers.’

Otto made eye contact. ‘We found out today that two separate groups of Russians are asking questions about us. One pair in Austria, one pair in Bavaria.’

Beesely rubbed his face. ‘At the moment we are not allowed to upset the Russians, we still don’t know who was behind it. But ... no one said anything about embarrassing them. Have them picked up by local police on routine stops and make sure that they have something illegal on them, spy equipment - Russian of course, but nothing too serious. We want them sent back with some difficult questions, not sent to jail.’

‘What timescale for this?’ Otto asked, making notes.

‘In the next few hours,’ Beesely responded. ‘Right, are there any other facts - not opinions - that we have not covered?’ Managers glanced at each other. ‘Herr Mole?’

‘I do not wish to make a judgement until the facts are clearer, as you say.’

‘Otto?’

‘I do not believe the Russian Government would be so stupid. We must look at the Chechens, or others.’

‘Yes, but what would *they* gain from a collapse in the West?’

‘They have no economy to destroy,’ Herr Mole pointed out. ‘They live off the land.’

‘An interesting point. We meet again tomorrow at 9am sharp. Thank you all.’

* * *

Beesely rested on a bench in front of the castle, enjoying the weather, when Otto walked over.

Otto took in the view. Without looking down he began, ‘Herr Mole just took and translated a call from the Russian gangster we used with Rudenson - Vladimir.’

‘What did *he* want?’

‘He wanted to sell some information.’

Beesely looked up, a quizzical frown. 'On what?'

'On who may have been behind the dirty bombs. He wants fifty million dollars.'

Beesely took in the pleasant summer scene, a fresh breeze off the lake helping to cool him on this hot day. 'Well, for that money he must think he has something.'

'He said he killed two people to get it, and spent a million dollars in bribes.'

'That sounds doubtful. Still, make an agreement in principle and send him one million dollars. Ask him what he knows.'

'And if it points towards the Russians?'

Beesely took a loud breath then stood up square to Otto. 'We stopped the cars, both of them. Now there are groups of Russian agents asking questions about us. Coincidence?'

'It is suspicious, yes. I will call back this Russian, he is waiting.'

As Otto walked in Johno walked out, now changed and showered. Beesely noted his t-shirt, words in German that translated to: 'Poor old English, they only have one beach towel each!' He allowed himself a brief, distracted smile.

Johno sat. 'Nice day, lovely view. How long till some fucker spoils it and the bullets start flying?' he asked, lighting up.

'Two separate Russian groups of spies were spotted, one in Austria and one in Bavaria. Coincidence?'

'Maybe we're just popular.'

'Maybe we're just unlucky. Oh, SAS team arriving discreetly this afternoon, make them cosy.'

'I wasn't expecting anyone?' Johno complained.

'They're active, on loan. I want one team on standby all the time.'

Johno took in the view. 'Where?'

Beesely turned and pointed to the front of the castle. 'Right bleeding there on the doorstep.'

Otto found Beesely on the same bench thirty minutes later, now with a cold drink, sandwiches and his jacket off.

‘Well?’ Beesely asked, not taking his gaze off the lake.

Otto stood with his hands clasped behind his back. ‘Not so good, this news.’ Beesely sipped his drink. ‘This Russian was holding a man, a man who knows everything. He was in a safe house outside of Moscow, which was raided by Russian Special Forces ten minutes ago.’

‘So, *they* have him, we don’t.’

‘But he got some information first. No links to Russian government, these men were paid ... in oil.’

Beesely snapped his head around. ‘The men who organized the attacks ... were paid in oil?’

Otto nodded. ‘Unrefined oil.’

Beesely lowered his head, thinking hard. ‘Where was the delivery made?’

‘Tanker to tanker, off the Yemen coast,’ Otto informed him.

Beesely cracked a brief smile. ‘In some ways that pleases me, in others it concerns me.’

‘You know who it is?’

‘Yes, a good idea. But, find out for me the exact grade of oil and percentage of water.’

Otto turned and stopped. ‘Don’t forget the six o’clock meeting, perhaps a rest first?’

Beesely nodded, taking in the beautiful lake scene once more before standing. ‘Try and get the Russian Ambassador here for 6pm.’

Otto hesitated. ‘Are you sure? Will he be in the meeting?’

‘He *is* the meeting.’ They walked up. ‘Oh, did you send that photo of Johno getting the medals to that glamour model whatsit ... Alison Star?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good, good.’ He dialled. ‘Dame Helen, please.’

‘Beesely, just cooking, house full. How goes it?’

‘The war has been called off.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Not Moscow.’

‘Who then?’

‘Looks like Tehran.’

There was a long pause at her end of the phone. ‘I’ll call you tomorrow, after I speak to the PM. Who else knows?’

‘Within the hour, all the interested parties.’

‘Understood. Sophie says ‘hi’, think she has been emailing your young lad.’

‘Emailing Thomas? I’ll keep an eye on it. Bye.’ He put his phone away. ‘So, Thomas has email?’

Otto explained, ‘Thomas has a 3g mobile, a PDA, wireless laptop with download to his MP3, text messaging on his wrist watch –’

‘Good to see he’s bright. All a bit beyond me.’

‘Would you like him to give you some lessons?’

‘Cheeky bugger.’ They walked on. ‘That’s what I employ you for.’

Otto’s phone chirped. After a few seconds he stopped Beesely. Holding down the phone he asked, ‘What about the Ukraine technician?’

Beesely did not hesitate. ‘The chair. Ask Mole if he wants to do it. Then send a video to all Ukraine nuclear power stations via DVD. But make sure there is no trace back to us. And a message in Russian saying what he did. He may have had second thoughts, but he released radioactive material to terrorists. Make the bastard suffer.’

* * *

Thomas led Johno on at a pace, through the shops and into an ornate arcade, the local tourist trap of Zug. Half way along the narrow passage, on the left, they entered a pastry shop which doubled up as a coffee shop. With two guards positioned outside they stepped in, the doorbell announcing the arrival of new customers.

A middle-aged woman at the counter looked up and around. ‘Thomas,’ she called, a welcome recognition and a warm smile.

Thomas closed the distance quickly then stopped and swivelled, introducing Johno.

The lady forced a smile onto her worried look. ‘Hello,’ she said in reasonable English.

Johnno smiled back at her. ‘Thomas says that this is best pastry shop in Zug, if not the whole world.’ The shop owner was pleased. ‘You make everything yourself?’ he asked, glancing at the selection.

‘Yes, of course.’

‘In that case, I’d like a sample of what you consider your best offerings, love.’ He turned and selected a table, one of six, just one other occupied, and lit-up despite the signs.

The owner called out a younger woman, a sales assistant. Thomas requested some pastries and sat.

‘You’re English?’ called a grey-haired and overweight man sat with his wife.

Johnno lifted his head from the menu and turned. ‘Yeah, mate. Where you from?’

‘Orpington –’

‘Kentshire!’ Johnno loudly announced with a smile, Thomas laughing.

The man glanced at his wife. ‘Kent-shire?’

‘We had some dealings with some Americans recently. They referred to Kent as Kent-shire.’

The man and his wife nodded. He said, ‘I can see how they’d mix it up. You got Oxfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Derbyshire – easy enough for foreigners to mix up.’

‘You on holiday?’

‘No, visiting my younger brother. Well, step-brother, almost fifteen years between us.’

‘He working here? Finance?’

The first dish of pastries was placed down, Thomas snatching up a slice and wolfing it down.

‘No, he’s a security guard of some sort.’

Johnno’s eyes narrowed, focusing on the British couple. ‘International Bank of Zurich?’

‘Yes, that sounds like it. Don’t get to see him much,’ the wife commented. ‘Always abroad doing something or other.’

Johnno lifted his eyebrows. ‘I know the feeling. If you don’t mind me asking, what’s his name?’

‘Michael Huntley,’ the man answered. ‘But everyone calls him Mavo.’

Thomas looked up, recognising the name. ‘Our Mavo?’

The couple focused on Thomas, their brows knitting.

Johno lifted his phone. ‘Send Mavo to the pastry shop in Zug arcade, fast as you can. Ta, love.’ He put his phone away, biting into a pastry.

‘You know him?’ the wife asked.

‘I’m his boss. Or one of them,’ Johno explained as he tried to swallow. He faced Thomas, ‘Oh ... this is good.’

‘I told you.’

‘What’s it called?’

‘Bavarian Napoleon ... I think.’

‘Ah, same stuff as in the castle?’ Thomas nodded. Johno faced the couple, who were still staring. ‘Try some of this.’ He beckoned the sales assistant and ordered some for Mavo’s family.

‘That’s good of you, but we’re trying to cut down,’ the wife suggested.

‘Nonsense, you’re on holiday. Work it off when you get home. How long you here?’

‘A week, touring around,’ she explained. ‘We only have tomorrow to see Mavo, he’s working the rest of the time.’

‘Where you staying tonight?’ Johno asked between chewing and swallowing.

The man explained, ‘Got the camper van, came over on the ferry. Be on a campsite tonight –’

‘No you won’t, you’ll be my guests. This is Switzerland, known for its hospitality – as well as getting up early and polishing your shoes.’ Thomas laughed, cake around his lips. ‘So we’re going to spoil you a bit.’

Two off-duty guards stopped outside the shop, exchanging greetings with Johno’s bodyguards. When Johno noticed he waved them in.

‘Grab a seat,’ he told them. ‘Pastries on me.’

They glanced at each other then sat. ‘Got an hour, sir.’ The sales assistant welcomed them as if family members, the guards ordering pastries and coffees.

‘Does she deliver to the guard canteen?’ Johnno asked, thumbing towards the sales assistant as she made the coffee.

‘No, unfortunately,’ a guard grumbled.

Johnno faced the woman, mouth full of food. ‘Excuse me, love?’ The guard called her by name. ‘I wanna buy your pastries and have them delivered to the guards at the castle.’

She frowned her lack of understanding, the guards then jumping in and explaining.

‘Which pastries. And how many?’ she nervously enquired.

‘Enough ... for a hundred guards a day?’ Johnno suggested to the guards, a slight shrug and a questioning look. They explained, shocking the woman.

‘Thank you, sir. It would be an honour,’ she managed to get out in broken English.

‘As many as you can make, just like these, delivered every day. Money is no problem.’

Thomas assisted with the translation, before noticing three school friends walking past. Seeing him they trotted quickly in.

‘You are Johnno!’ they excitedly stated at the same time.

‘Johnno?’ Mavo’s stepbrother loudly repeated, a stunned look.

Johnno glanced at the man before giving the boys his attention. ‘Who broke security?’ he demanded, standing up. ‘Guards!’

The two off-duty guards stood, blocking any escape for the boys, who now looked terrified. Johnno drew his weapon. The sales assistant took a sharp intake of breath. Mavo’s brother gasped and his wife yelped.

Johnno released the magazine and pocketed it, cleared and checked the chamber then handed it to the first boy with a smile. ‘Had you there!’ They laughed, grabbing the pistol and examining at it, the guards laughing and sitting. Johnno held up a flat hand to Mavo’s family. ‘Sorry, just winding up the kids.’ He faced the boys. ‘Anything you want in here boys, it’s on me.’ He sat as they shouted orders for cakes and pastries, pulling up chairs next to Thomas, still examining the pistol.

‘You used this to kill the terrorists in London?’ they excitedly asked.

‘Yeah,’ Johno answered with a smile, now surrounded by attentive boys.

‘And then you flew the helicopter with the nuclear bomb in it!’ they gasped.

‘Shhhhhh,’ Johno let out. ‘People ain’t supposed to know.’ He winked at them, taking back the pistol.

Coffees were hurriedly served, a tea for Johno and a lemonade for Thomas. The boys were soon munching quickly through their favourites, speaking too quickly in German for him to follow.

Five minutes later Mavo jogged to the shop, entering in a hurry and out of breath, still in his black fatigues. ‘Johno?’ he called, thinking something wrong, his head alternating between his brother and Johno.

Johno waved him over. ‘I bumped into your bother here. You on duty?’

‘Till nine o’clock tonight,’ Mavo explained, catching his breath.

‘Not any more. I’ll fix it.’ Johno pointed at one of the off-duty guards. ‘Tell the castle that Mavo is off duty today and tomorrow.’ The man raised his phone.

‘Thanks, Boss,’ Mavo let out, pulling up a seat next to his family.

‘They’re in a crappy camper van,’ Johno loudly commented. ‘So take ‘em up to the Spa and spoil them tonight, tell them I sent you. You get yourself a room there as well. And don’t forget to nick some of those fancy robes and towels!’

Mavo laughed loudly. ‘I’ll wear ‘em around the guard barracks.’

Johno tipped his eyebrows. ‘I wouldn’t. K2 guards – dodgy bunch of fuckers.’

The off-duty guards offered him playful, scolding looks.

An hour later and Johno was struggling, leaning back and letting out his belt buckle, the boys covered in flour and pastry. Five more friends of Thomas had joined them and one parent, the shop now a wreck.

Johno sipped what was left of a flat lemonade, waving over the shop owner. ‘We have an account, love?’ Thomas helped

with the translation. They did. Johno faced one of the off-duty guards as he stood. 'Make sure she bills everything to us, yeah.'

'OK, Boss.'

'And don't forget the deliveries.' Johno stood. 'Thomas, you're driving us back.'

'Yes!' Thomas said as he jumped up, actually believing he was in with a chance, his school chums amazed.

When they reached the compound gates Johno relented, giving Thomas his first driving lesson, carefully observed by the guards – who were hurriedly radioing each other.

Beesely stood with Otto, talking to a manager when the man's radio came to life.

'Warning! Clear the camp road – Johno is giving Thomas driving lessons!'

Beesely took a breath, closed his eyes for a moment, before continuing with the previous conversation.

The road was now clear.

Thomas started the Mercedes, easy enough for him to manage, the vehicle being automatic. He progressed slowly and carefully up the east camp road and turned into the drawbridge, missing the sides and coming to a halt in the courtyard. Finally he pressed hard on the brake and turned the engine off.

'Very good,' Johno commended. 'Next week, hand brake turns.'

Thomas was proud of himself, bounding out with a huge smile.

Simon, a senior guard, walked up. 'Johno, we've taken a vote – and from now on we want Thomas to drive you around.'

'Fuck off,' Johno quietly let out, holding his stomach, the courtyard guards laughing at him and congratulating Thomas.

In the foyer Johno raised a hand towards Mr. Freiserling, stood now in his usual spot behind the reception desk. 'I've arranged some pastries to be delivered to the castle from a

local shop. Make sure there's always some in my fridge and some upstairs. Yeah?'

Mr. Freiserling offered a quick, Swiss head tip. 'Very good, sir.'

In the cool dungeon they slumped, both full.

'UB40. Beer,' Johno managed.

Thomas eased up, selecting the correct CD before pulling a draft lager.

Johno sipped. 'I could give you driving lessons, but you're too young for the roads. What's the age here ... to drive?'

'Seventeen, I think,' Thomas said with a slight frown.

'So don't whinge. It's not like I don't want to. OK?'

'OK.'

'OK then,' Johno whispered, listening to the music.

After a minute Thomas said, 'I copied this CD for my friends. They like it.'

Johno took a sip. 'How'd you copy it?'

'The computer,' Thomas explained, pointing.

Johno nodded. 'What about that compilation you did for me?'

'Downloaded it all from Napster, straight to disk.'

'Good. Smart lad. You take after me.'

'No I don't,' Thomas protested with a tired smile.

Johno studied him. 'Know anything about your real father?'

Thomas shook his head, losing the smile.

'Swiss?'

Thomas nodded.

'Not curious?'

Thomas shook his head, leaving Johno wondering about many things.

3

The spokesman for 'The Society' was the first to join Beesely in the re-decorated restaurant, the man uncharacteristically early for a Swiss. But then this was not a society meeting, and it was daylight. The man noted the strange arrangement of chairs as Beesely greeted him. Beesely did not explain the

arrangement, just asked him to sit at the back and observe quietly; he was there as a courtesy.

Next came Minister Blaum and the Swiss Foreign Minister, again asked to sit at the back and observe.

Oliver Stanton stepped in by himself, warmly greeted by Beesely, but sat separate to the others without being introduced. Blaum and Delgarcia glanced at each other, then across at the stranger, drinks being brought out to them by kitchen staff as they waited, puzzling over many things.

Elle Rosen and his 'superior' were next, also not introduced to anyone, although his superior tipped his head slightly at Stanton. They were seated apart from the others, but closer to the centre.

Otto arrived last with the Russians, followed by John. The Russians were seated as if this meeting was all about them, opposite Beesely and Otto, but with no one behind them, everyone basically sat in line of sight of each other. Beesely gestured the Russians to their seats and arranged food, checking they both spoke English. The modestly dressed Russians, both in their fifties, checked every face in the room and also the ceiling scanners.

Otto finally sat, Beesely remaining on feet. Beesely began, 'Welcome to you all, and thank you all for coming here today, some at very short notice. I am not going to introduce all of the people here today because many of you work in secret.' He finished that sentence by making direct eye contact with the Russian Ambassador.

'I am sure that you are curious as to who I am, and who I represent. Well, for the purposes of this meeting I unofficially represent British and American Intelligence agencies.' The Russians glanced at each other.

'So, to who's who?' He pointed at Oliver Stanton. 'American Government.' The Russians studied him. He pointed at the Israelis. 'Israeli government.' Then the Swiss Ministers, 'Swiss Government.' Finally the representative of The Society, 'World's largest financial trading block.'

The Russians were now a little bewildered. 'We can make no agreements on behalf of our government –'

Beesely raised a hand. 'You will not be required to. Now, gentlemen, we recently had a problem involving two radioactive dirty bombs.' He began pacing around the table. 'The result was a stock market crash, panic and - if the bomb in London had gone off somewhere strategic - we would have seen a complete collapse of the economy of the West. That, gentlemen, would have hurt us all.'

He made eye contact with the Russian Ambassador. 'Including Russia, which has a great many interests in the West. For that reason I do not believe that the Russian Government is behind it, although the attacks were executed in such a way that it would have blamed them.'

The Russians were shocked. 'Blame us?'

Beesely focused on the Russian who had been doing most of the talking. 'Your special forces raided a house outside of Moscow a few hours ago, arresting some of the men who were paid to organize the attacks.'

'How do you know this?' the man demanded.

'I have my sources. Once you have interrogated these people I will be happy to receive a call from you, explaining what they said. We expect closer co-operation in the future on terrorist and criminal matters.'

They nodded their reluctant acceptance of that idea.

He leant across the table, his weight on his hands. 'Gentlemen, if the bomb in London had gone off, and the evidence led back to Moscow - as it did for a while - then the West could have been looking at a nuclear retaliation against Russia.'

They straightened in their chairs, looking horrified.

'So, gentlemen, when I talk about co-operation, it is in your best interests. Would you not agree?' They nodded. 'That bomb was ten minutes from the centre of London. That means, gentlemen, that we were all maybe ten minutes from a nuclear incident and a potential retaliation from NATO.'

He let them think about it for a while, the Russians sipping their drinks nervously.

'Now, we have been investigating the matter closely, using a lot of resources and money. We have also lost some of our

people. Oh, by the way, your agents in Bavaria and Austria are being arrested as we speak. They will be sent back to Russia.'

The Russians said nothing as he handed them business cards.

'If you want to know something about me, pick up the phone, don't send agents.'

Beesely glanced out of the window. 'We have determined that the Chechen man at the centre of this, and his Russian friends, were paid to plan the attack.' As he uttered the next line, with careful emphasis, he glanced from Stanton to the Israelis. 'Paid in oil, transferred ship-to-ship off the coast of Yemen.'

Stanton glanced at the Israelis. They looked back, both straightening in their seats.

'Further investigations are taking place, but we - Western Intelligence - do not believe that the Russian Government was behind the attacks.'

Beesely stepped to the spokesman for The Society, whispered in his ear, shook hands and then directed the man out. Next he shook hands with a surprised pair of Swiss Ministers and they also left, as requested. Next he addressed the Russians. 'I will be looking forward to a response from your government very soon. You will be flown back to Bern.'

A little bewildered they stood, shook hands and left.

'Well that was short and sweet,' Johno said as he stood. He stretched and grabbed a drink.

Beesely gestured the Israelis and Stanton towards the centre, adjusting chairs for them. He ordered a red wine then sat. Blowing out hard he said, 'We were gearing up for a bit of a fight with Moscow. Brit Government decided that anything I do would give them plausible deniability. Even gave me some logistical support, which I won't give back, not yet anyway.'

Stanton smiled. 'So how's the old body holding up?' He sipped his wine, easing back.

'At my age, multiply everything by ten. So, down to business. The Middle East is not my area, and I don't give a rat's arse what happens off the coast of Yemen. You, gentlemen, can solve that problem without me. Before anyone

asks, I'm not getting involved. My area of concern ... is Central Europe.'

The Israeli Government representative asked, 'You'll send us what you discovered?'

'Have to bribe and shoot a few more Russians first, if we want names and dates.'

Otto tipped his head forwards. 'I will arrange for the Russian police to be bribed, they are holding the key suspect. I think the Chechen is dead, bodies were taken out of a shoot-out in Grosny a short while ago.'

Beesely explained, 'When I called this meeting I thought we'd be going up against Russian Secret Service, the FSB as it's called these days. Strange relief that is the Iranians.'

'Not for us,' Elle scowled.

'Like I said, your problem. I've done enough.'

'More than enough,' Stanton commented. 'We'll take it from here.'

'Take it a long way off,' Beesely scoffed before sipping his wine. 'Oh, we have rooms for you at our five star Spa, or you can stay here if you wish, nice rooms - and very secure these days. Lots of Israeli detectors in the ceilings!'

They laughed.

'When do the new weapons arrive?' Stanton asked.

'Couple of days, flying down from your airbases in Germany,' Beesely replied.

Stanton said, 'I'll be staying at the US Embassy tonight, got some difficult calls to make.'

'Cars and helicopter ready when you are,' Beesely offered.

Elle said, 'Same for us, we are expected in the Embassy, but kind of you.'

They chatted for ten minutes before the visitors headed off, kitchen staff starting to clean up.

'Now is a good time to tell you both something,' Otto stated after the guests had left. Their interest was piqued, Johnno sitting closer. Otto sighed, 'Next week I am getting married.'

Beesely and Johnno stared at each other, open mouthed, then turned back to Otto.

'When did this happen?' Beesely asked.

‘I have known this girl for some three years, but I kept it quiet.’

‘No shit,’ Johno quipped. ‘Got a picture?’

‘I don’t carry one, in case I am captured and they see her.’

‘Yeah, good thinking,’ Johno said with a sceptical frown.

‘Will we get to meet her?’ Beesely keenly asked.

‘Yes of course. At the wedding.’

‘Is she up the duff?’ Johno joked, Beesely slapping his arm.

‘Up the ...?’ Otto repeated. ‘Oh, I see. Yes.’

Beesely sighed and rolled his eyes. ‘Well that makes sense, you’re my boy after all.’

‘It will be a small, private wedding, a few guests,’ Otto explained.

‘When do you find the time to see her?’ Johno asked.

‘Before *you* came ... it was not a problem.’

‘He’s got a point,’ Beesely reluctantly admitted.

Johno smiled, making eye contact with Otto. ‘Well ... er ... where does she work?’ he asked, trying to say the right thing.

‘In the bank. She is a risk analyst.’

‘Bright girl,’ Beesely commended.

‘Yeah, so what does she see in you?’ Johno asked, smiling.

‘Large cock,’ Otto answered with neutral features, Johno and Beesely laughing.

Beesely pointed at him. ‘You, my boy, have been spending too much time around *him*.’

Thomas walked in.

‘Hey brat, what’s up?’ Johno called.

‘When are you going to England next?’ he enquired without making eye contact.

Beesely made eye contact with Johno, hiding a grin. ‘Don’t know. May not be for a while.’

‘You will not be visiting Dame Helen again?’ he softly enquired.

Again Beesely made eye contact Johno. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘No reason. She is a nice lady ... and you are friends.’

‘Love is in the air,’ Johno announced with a broad smile.

Otto made eye contact with Beesely, tipping his head towards Johno. ‘His turn next.’ Beesely grinned.

‘Ha!’ Johnno laughed. ‘No chance.’

* * *

In his Tivoli hilltop villa, Pepi faced five of his lieutenants over his grand desk. He tapped his cigar before taking a long draw as he studied them. Blowing out a large pall of smoke towards the ceiling he said, ‘So, we have a puzzle.’ He made eye contact with the first man. ‘What do we know about this meeting?’

‘There was a senior representative of American Intelligence, also of Israeli Intelligence, Ministers Blaum and Delgarcia, the bank society and the Russian Ambassador to Switzerland.’

Pepi gestured with a hand, an invitation to continue.

The same man added, ‘It was a short meeting. They confronted the Russians, told them it may be best to co-operate, because the attacks looked like coming from Russia.’

‘So, they believe that the attacks were not Russian?’ Pepi pondered.

‘At first they did, yes, but not now.’

‘And who, now, does K2 suspect?’ Pepi calmly enquired.

‘They believe that Russian mafia were involved, Chechens and others. They have received information from Russia.’

‘So they may soon track back to our good friend, Mister Luchenkov.’ He glanced up at the ceiling, resting his head on the chair back. Tipping his head forwards he added, ‘Something is not right here.’

‘Sir?’ a man asked.

‘Our people in France have confirmed a great deal of activity within certain gangs. Strange movements, very tightly guarded, even to us. It would appear that the Americans are going to move against K2, and yet Henry O’Sullivan has said nothing to the good cardinal, despite their very close relationship – which dates back fifty years.’

‘The Americans helped K2 against the ball bearings,’ a man puzzled.

Pepi raised a finger, ‘Making themselves look good in front of the British perhaps?’

‘They send high level officials to K2,’ another mentioned.

Pepi lifted his eyebrows and nodded. ‘As I said, something is not right here. Somewhere along the line our information is being spoon fed to us. If we could rely on all our sources we would not be this confused. The Americans may attack K2. If they do ... fine, the publicity will hurt them both and we can then move. But someone is lying.’

‘Who is the traitor? Luchenkov or O’Sullivan?’ a man asked.

‘I believe the term is ... double-agent. Still, neither Henry O’Sullivan, nor Luchenkov, know what we have planned in England. But they *will* ... get the blame. We have even used their people to organise it without them knowing about it.’

It's a very strange war

1

It was a beautiful morning for a stroll around the lake. Beesely had completed his daily health ritual, a fifteen-minute brisk walk, and sat now enjoying the sun and the view out over the lake and mountains. Two guards stood a discreet distance to the left, another two to the rear.

Johno's arrival back from his shopping trip had been loudly announced with a screech, a hand brake turn designed to frighten the guards. He figured their bruising would heal in a few days and offered large sums for their silence. Now he approached Beesely's bench. 'Nice day for it.' He took in the view, sucking in a deep breath and loudly exhaling as he took his sunglasses off.

'Wonderful,' Beesely agreed, still fixed on the pleasant vista. 'New car?'

'Yep. Thought I'd treat myself.' Johno thrust his hands into his pockets. 'Mercedes dealership the other side of Zug, never knew it was there.'

Without bothering to look up Beesely said, 'You know, there is a rather efficient intelligence agency around here somewhere, if I can just remember where I put it. They may *tell you* where the car dealerships are.'

'That's handy.' Johno picked his nose. 'What's on the agenda?'

'Oh, nothing too strenuous today. Healing, relaxing, recovering.'

'Sounds good.' Johno slumped down next to Beesely, leaning back and resting his elbows on the bench top.

'Tell me, does the leg hurt when you drive?' Beesely casually enquired.

'Yeah, but I ain't going to let that get in the way.'

Beesely nodded his approval of Johno's stoic attitude as his phone rang. 'Beesely here.'

'Sir, it's a Peter Hawthorn, AGN Security, England.'

'OK, put him through.'

‘Sir Morris?’

‘Yes. You’re Max’s son?’

‘Yes, sir. Got some bad news,’ the voice sombrelly stated.
‘Max rolled his car.’

‘Is he hurt?’ Beesely asked as he stood, Johnno turning his head and following Beesely to his feet.

‘Yes, sir. Badly busted up, might not make it.’

‘Is he getting the best possible care?’ Beesely firmly pressed.

‘In an NHS hospital at the moment, can’t move him, he’s critical. Got a spinal injury.’

‘Hell and damnation.’ He made eye contact with Johnno. ‘Max always did drive like an idiot. Was he ... you know ... a bit tipsy?’

Johnno raised his hands in exasperation and turned away.

‘No, sir, this was early this morning. Police say that it looks like he was rammed off the road ... and last night he called me to say he was still being watched.’

‘Don’t say another word.’ Beesely hung up as Johnno snapped around. ‘Someone rammed Max off the road. Deliberately! And he was being watched.’

Johnno took out his phone. ‘I’m all over it,’ he said as he turned and stepped away a few paces, across the neatly mown grass.

Beesely sat back down and heaved a sigh, thinking hard as Herr Mole walked slowly across. He turned his head, offering Mole a disappointed look. ‘Herr Mole, given your leg, you should simply call if you want to speak to me.’

‘If I do not walk, sir, it becomes worse,’ the little man explained as he drew near.

Beesely’s features softened. ‘I understand. How can I help?’

‘We had a call from the Russian, the man who helped with the capture of Rudenson.’

‘Oh yes? More news?’

‘Of a sort, if it can be believed. He has reported that he is in hiding and that a rich Russian businessman has placed a one hundred million dollar bounty ... on your head.’

Beesely forced a sadistic smile. 'Well, I would be insulted it if it was any less. Don't you think?'

'Yes, sir,' Herr Mole agreed, tipping his head. 'On another matter, I was curious about your interest in the composition of the oil. Crude oil can be analysed and traced to its source, a very clever idea of yours if I may say so, sir.'

'You may say so as often as you like. I never get tired of people calling me clever. Go on.' Johnno could now be heard shouting into his phone, causing Mole to glance his way.

'I have taught myself the basics of oil geology, an interesting topic.'

Beesely raised his eyebrows. 'Since yesterday?'

'Just the relevant parts.'

'And?' Beesely nudged.

'According to what information we did get from our Russian friend yesterday I have determined where it was sold. Rotterdam junk oil market, for sixty percent of its worth.'

'Now that's clever work of you. I would have figured they'd sail down to South Africa or round to Nigeria.'

'They did, but were not offered a good price.'

'Hold on ... the time taken to sail around Africa -'

'Is at least two weeks at full steam,' Mole finished off.

'And the preparation time, ship to ship transfers, would mean -'

'That this payment was in process four weeks ago.'

Beesely turned his head and took in the lake view. 'Before Otto contacted me.'

'Yes, sir.'

He turned, 'OK, you were saying something about Amsterdam?'

'Rotterdam, sir. They sailed to Rotterdam, where each oil consignment is logged and its quality recorded on computer. We hacked into the computers.'

Beesely tipped his head. 'And it came from?'

'Siberia, sir.'

Beesely slowly stood, his features hardening.

Johnno shouted down his phone. Turning he said, 'Beesely! Wilko Thomas, an old boy from the funeral, was tortured at

length then had his throat cut. Sergeant Mason is missing.' He went back to his call.

'Problems, sir?' Mole enquired.

Beesely rubbed his forehead as he thought, not making eye contact with Mole. 'Someone is attacking our English associates,' Beesely informed him, lowering his head and thinking hard.

'Have we a problem with some element of British Intelligence?'

'If we did I would know about it,' Beesely insisted, struggling now with many thoughts.

Mole's phone warbled. Taking it out of his pocket he answered it, starting to speak in Russian and observed with great impatience by Beesely. It was a short conversation. 'That was the Russian Ambassador to Switzerland, sir. He insists that the four Russian citizens arrested yesterday, two in Bavaria and two in Austria, were not Russian Government agents –'

'Not bleeding surprising, is it!'

'He insists that they are criminals, working for a certain ... Boris Luchnikov, the same man reported to have placed the bounty on your head.'

Beesely studied the little man carefully for several seconds. 'That's starting to make some sense. Did this... gentleman make his money in Siberian oil?'

'Yes, sir. If memory serves.'

'I trust your memory,' Beesely strongly enthused. His phone rang again, so Mole started to limp slowly away. 'Beesely here.'

'Sir Morris? Willis here, assistant to the director.'

'Willis? Yes, I remember,' Beesely stated as if interrupted from something very important.

'Got some bad news I'm afraid. The director's car was in a smash this morning –' Beesely jaw dropped open. '- on her way in. She's in critical condition, but I'm afraid to say ... her daughter, Sophie ... was killed.'

'And Tom and Tabitha?' Beesely asked in a forced whispered.

'They were not in the vehicle, sir.'

Beesely closed his eyes. 'Thank God.'

'I thought you should know and –'

'It was deliberate.'

There was a long pause at the other end. 'What?'

'Several of our people in the UK were hit last night. Listen, I need you to get a message to the Home Secretary. Tell him that a Russian billionaire has declared war on K2, and its friends and allies in the UK. You got all that?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Then move it, mister!' Beesely barked.

Johno was still shouting down the phone, now walking in small circles. The guards had closed in, appearing concerned.

Beesely pressed the green button. 'Get me Colonel Milward, SAS, fast!' He waited, the beautiful scenery a surreal backdrop to what was going through his mind.

'Beesely?' came ten seconds later.

'Milward, listen well. A Russian billionaire has put a large bounty on my head. So far today Max Clifford has been run off the road and paralysed, former trooper Wilko Thomas was tortured for information and then killed, your Sergeant Mason has been abducted and Dame Helen is fighting for her life in hospital, her daughter dead! Do us a both a fucking favour and earn your bastard keep today!' He hung up.

Johno approached, fuming. 'Someone's hit a lot of our people in the UK.'

'It's the mastermind behind the dirty bombs, some Russian billionaire gangster called Boris something or other. Guess what, he's put a bounty on my head.'

'He's fucking with the wrong people!' Johno snarled.

Beesely put a hand on Johno's shoulder, bringing him in to a confidential distance. 'You know that, and I know that ... but does *he* know that?' They exchanged a look. 'The one thing about a *very* secret organization ... is that people in the outside world don't know your capabilities. Those people that Gunter gave the chair to know to stay away, this idiot doesn't.'

'So he'll send some mercenaries our way, guys who don't know us ... and don't frigging fear us,' Johno quietly surmised.

Beesely raised an eyebrow. 'With that kind of money you can buy a lot more than tired old mercenaries.'

Johno nodded to himself as he thought. 'You could buy Yanks, French, maybe even some Brits.'

'Maybe hell.' They turned and walked towards the castle, the guards closing in.

Johno suggested, 'If they started this last night and this morning –'

'Then we may have a little unwelcome visitor or two already.'

'Nothing reported,' Johno noted as they both glanced around the otherwise calm camp.

'Like I said, with that money you can get good help.'

The SAS 'old dogs' were walking past the castle.

'Call them,' Beesely whispered.

'Hey, you lot! Front and centre!' Johno shouted.

The ex-SAS gang stopped, glanced around then closed the distance.

When close enough Johno whispered, 'We've got unwelcome visitors inside the perimeter. Tool up, hide the weapons, then go about your business, tip off the rest.' Then loudly, 'And next time clean the fucking pigs out properly!'

'Yes, sir!' they collectively shouted, turning and walking briskly down towards the camp barracks.

As Johno and Beesely passed the guards on the drawbridge they whispered, 'Silent alarm, attack imminent.'

In the great hall they met a team of the regular SAS; four troopers, one Captain and one field medic doubling up as communications man.

Beesely waved them over as he walked towards the control room. 'Listen up, and listen well. There are highly trained and well paid mercenaries on their way here. Their objective is to kill me and my command staff. You, gentlemen, picked a bad time to arrive. You'll probably all be dead by dawn tomorrow.'

The soldiers glanced at each other as they cocked and checked weapons. Beesely added, 'They have already killed several troopers in the UK, including old boys, and Max Hawthorn is on life-support. Captain, with me, get your other

buddy, rest of you ... your battleground for today is here, the foyer and up the stairwell. Pick yourselves a spot, expect trouble.' He turned and walked briskly on, his head lowered.

* * *

From the boardroom windows Pepi gazed down at the distant ocean, the water's surface a brilliant sparkling blue on this cloudless day. The other directors of Encosol Construction gathered around the boardroom table at their Genoa headquarters, cordially greeting each other.

A man drew level at the window, Pepi not looking around. 'The attacks in England have gone well ... for Luchenkov. The attack on K2 by the Americans will begin soon.'

'And our assessment of the force attacking the castle?' Pepi casually enquired.

'They will probably fail.'

'Which begs the question, why would Luchenkov fund it in this manner? More to the point, why accept logistical help from Henry O'Sullivan?'

The second man considered his reply. 'The Americans have rendered assistance to K2 twice now, and yet they attack ... in this odd manner. Perhaps the Americans don't know of K2's strength.'

'They ... have their own agenda. And I believe that the good cardinal's friend ... may be playing him as much as we are playing them.' He let out a loud breath. 'Still, by the end of today we should have moved a few pieces on the chessboard.'

'Forwards ... or backwards?' the second man pointedly asked.

The two men made eye contact briefly before Pepi's phone warbled. He stepped away. 'Yes, sir?'

'It has begun?'

'Yes, sir. The English targets were hit this morning, Luchenkov has no idea about them, neither does O'Sullivan – they are focused on K2.'

'We should not have allowed this situation to develop. I trusted your judgement –'

‘By the end of today, sir, K2 will be exposed to the world’s media,’ Pepi quickly cut in with. ‘That is ... as we discussed. They will also be at odds with the Americans, closing that concern.’

‘We did not discuss Luchenkov and O’Sullivan becoming bed fellows! I have found out today that they met last week.’

‘Last week?’ Pepi puzzled.

‘And said nothing to us!’

‘That ... is a concern, sir.’

‘Find out what they are up to. I don’t like surprises!’

2

In Fernbank Road, Ross-on-Wye, Sergeant Trevors had just received a call; someone was attacking troopers, current and serving. He had taken the call in his bedroom, his wife shopping down in Newport with the new neighbour’s wife.

The new neighbours had been next door for almost a month now. Their initial warmth had been tempered by the fact that the Sergeant’s dear lady wife had revealed his occupation to the new neighbour’s wife: soldier, Hereford. The husband was ex-RAF, so had put two and two together straight away, then decided to distance himself for some reason. The wives were getting along well enough, and he was away a lot, so the neighbours’ attitude was not a problem. Still, that coming Saturday was due to be the first barbecue together, Trevors under strict orders from his wife to ‘be nice’.

By a stroke of pure luck he had taken the call in his bedroom, stood now behind the curtain and viewing the end of his garden and the overgrown bushes that the good woman had been complaining about that very morning. Unfortunately, the gardens here backed onto farm fields, making them easy access for unwelcome visitors.

He noticed movement; a boot striped with green paint. Opening his wardrobe doors quietly he reached up and pulled down his Bergen, slowly and gently lowering it. His Browning 9mm was in his hand a second later. Magazine out, eyeball check, tap the mag’, load, slide back – a well practiced drill.

With his back to the wall he peered through a slit in the curtains, noting their cat walking up the garden path. It stopped, crouched down, hissed at someone unseen then ran back towards the house. Now he could see the end of a barrel.

Opening this window to fire would be noisy, spotted instantly. Wait, he remembered, the bathroom window was already open. Ducking down below window level he crawled quickly next door. Yes, it was open! One foot on the bath, one on the sink, he rose up behind the frosted glass, taking aim through the open top window.

The shed roof was in the way. Thin wood, he remembered. Really thin wood. He aimed.

A head popped up, camouflaged. He aimed carefully then fired.

The head dropped out of sight. He fired four rounds through the shed, dropped to the floor, then ran downstairs as fast as possible, straight out of the back door, pistol held up on probable position of target. He fired two more shots through the shed.

Running, diving, sliding on the moist grass, pistol pointed towards the back of the shed. A body, slumped. He fired two rounds into the face, knocking the man's head backwards.

He stopped, breathing hard. Survey the area, he told himself; damp grass, big slug, next-door's dog barking, no one else visible.

Standing, he quickly grabbed the man and dragged him onto the lawn, lifting his rifle. 'Nice piece of kit,' he muttered, no response coming from the body.

He gave the body a good kick to the stomach then stood on the man's neck. Breathing deeply, he turned back towards the house. Then he noticed his new neighbour, up a ladder, just staring at him, mouth open, paintbrush in hand.

Foot off neck. Wonder how much he saw?

The police officer surveyed the scene at Sergeant Wilson's home, Shobdon, near Leominster. The body lay covered with a white sheet – apparently taken from the neighbour's clothesline - blood visible where the would-be assassin was

shot twice in the chest and once in the head. He stepped forwards.

No, he told himself, no bullet holes visible in Wilson's garden, the shed a bullet hole free zone. As was the rear fence and the birdbath.

And yet...

He peered over the low wooden fence that separated the gardens as numerous fellow officers bustled about. The neighbour was obviously very proud of his garden and had spent a great deal of time, money and effort on it. The collection of garden gnomes numbered more than a hundred, the occupier obviously an avid fan of such garden ornaments. Many of the gnomes surrounded a large ornate carp pond. Those that were left standing.

Several large carp lay belly-up on the surface, apparently suffering from gunshot wounds. Wilson drew level with the officer as the man rested his hands on the garden fence, taking in the scene of carnage next door.

The officer did not bother to look around. 'So, mister SAS fucking crack shot fucking marksman. According to your provisional statement the stiff shot at you from over there, ran around dodging your return fire – all thirty fucking rounds of it – jumped the fence to this side ... and then you shot him deader than hell.'

Now he turned to face Wilson. 'And yet, whilst the would be assassin ran around over there, you missed him – but managed to quite accurately destroy your neighbour's garden gnomes, plus the fucking Koi carp!'

Wilson shrugged, glancing left and right from under his eyebrows.

'My fucking wife can shoot better than you!'

Again Wilson shrugged. 'That's my story ... and I'm fucking sticking to it, plod.'

Another trooper stepped up, slapping Wilson on the back. 'Good one, Will-oh, got the fucker. Pity you couldn't have got that neighbour you fucking hate in the crossfire,' he laughed, stepping away.

The police officer folded his arms.

The corridor to the command centre was now lined with guards kitted out in body armour, helmets and M4 assault rifles.

Beesely stopped at the top of the steps leading down to the control room floor, at the edge of the brighter lights. 'Ladies and gentlemen,' he loudly called. The managers and staff all stopped what they were doing. 'I stood on this spot a few weeks ago, nervously greeting you all for the first time. Since that time I have come to respect your abilities and your talents. We all went through the nerve agent attack together and you performed very well. But today will be different. Today we face imminent attack by some of the world's best mercenaries, highly paid ... and highly motivated.' He took in their faces. 'Many of us will not survive.'

They glanced at each other.

'I want all non-essential personnel to go home, but please leave slowly and quietly, we must not let those watching this place know that we are onto them. Then, I want all non-essential female staff to leave, again slowly.'

He sought out Otto, now moving towards him through the managers. 'We must give them no hint that we are expecting an attack. If we do, we simply delay the inevitable and I want these bastards in close.

'To quote a famous North Vietnamese general, *we will grab them by the belt buckles*. Otto, I want all remaining staff - who know how to use a pistol - to be armed, weapons hidden. All gate guards are to be warned, but numbers are *not* to be increased. Everything outside must appear normal. I want all trainees to be sent on a camping and climbing exercise immediately, a long way off. No one must remain here who is not trained, able and willing to face death. All managers, my office, now.' He sat and opened his drawer, taking out some chocolate, Johnno sitting on the side of the desk.

Otto rushed in. 'Who will be attacking us?' he gasped.

Calmly, Beesely answered, 'Apparently, the guy with the money behind the dirty bomb attacks on London.'

'Why?' Otto asked, almost a demand.

Beesely carefully studied Otto for a moment. 'I would assume ... because *we* stopped the bombs, and he knows that.' He took a breath as Otto digested what he was saying, a glance at Johno. 'Unless, of course, you know of anyone ... else, who might be behind the attacks on our people in the UK?'

'If I did, you would know instantly, of course,' Otto insisted, another quick glance at Johno.

'Well then,' Beesely began, taking a breath. 'Let's hope K2 is as ... *well prepared* as we would all like to think it is. This will be quite some test.'

Otto and Johno stood off to the left as the SAS Captain stepped in, interrupting the conversation. The managers stepped in quickly, arranging chairs. Mole sat to Beesely's right, shoulder holster now on and looking way too big for him. Last to arrive was the second SAS Captain, escorted by two guards.

'OK, I guess we are all here.' Beesely rubbed his forehead. 'Gentlemen. And lady. What we face today will test us all to the limits, and beyond. We may lose people, we may even lose everything.'

The managers were aghast at the suggestion.

'A Russian billionaire seems to have been behind the radioactive dirty bombs and he has hired some of the world's best mercenaries, and others, to hunt us down and kill us. Judging by the way they have attacked in the UK I would say they have some good help from an ex-community figure, someone high up. They managed to take out the head of MI6, so let's not kid ourselves about how good they are.'

'Dame Helen is dead?' Otto gasped.

'Near as,' Johno put in.

'In hospital, probably paralysed, her daughter dead,' Beesely explained, noting the shocked looks.

'And so is Max at AGN,' Johno sourly added.

Beesely took a sip of water. 'If we are going to win today ... we shall have to think our way through the problem. Our greatest weapon is that we know they are coming. Our greatest defence will be *not* to do what is expected of us.'

'Sir,' the first SAS Captain called, stood in his camouflage clothing. 'Why don't we just get *you* the hell out of here?'

‘No!’ Herr Mole firmly cut in, everyone focusing on him, and his out-of-character outburst. ‘That is what they want. How easy it will be to shoot down a helicopter or attack a vehicle convoy. No, they will expect one of two things - for you to hide in the lower bunker, or for you to leave.’

Beesely nodded in agreement. ‘Absolutely right. The last thing they expect is to see me in my shorts swimming in the lake. Unfortunately, after they have recovered their initial shock they will probably just shoot me. So ... we need to formulate some plans, and we need to think as they think. Johno -’ Johno stepped forwards. ‘- if you were paid many millions to attack this place, how would you go about it?’

They all focused on him.

‘There’re two ways a well-trained soldier could get close; over the hill behind us, or the lake. First, the hill. Plenty of cracks and crevices, you could hide twenty snipers up there and we’d never know about it. Not to mention ten miles of dense fucking forest! You could move a battalion to within striking range and we’d never know about it.’

Beesely pointed at the managers. ‘Let’s work on the assumption that there are snipers on the mountain.’

Johno continued, ‘The one good thing is that we’ve got some of the world’s best climbers right here. That’s a big advantage, their snipers will be moving slowly over the rocks. We need two or three four-man teams, with sniper rifles and night sights, enough food for a few days. They can sweep the area, or just wait for the first few shots and then zero in on them.’

Beesely turned his head towards Otto and carefully mouthed, ‘Pronto!’

Otto grabbed a manager and they stepped outside.

‘What else?’ Beesely asked.

Johno paced. ‘We won’t get all the snipers, it’ll take days.’

The first SAS Captain stepped forwards. ‘I saw fifty calibre rifles in your armoury. Get them to the lakeside, pin down any snipers above us,’ he confidently recommended.

‘Yeah,’ Johno agreed, cynically adding, ‘Good idea, Rupert.’

Beesely pointed at a manager, who stepped quickly out, Johno and the young officer exchanging looks.

‘The lake could be an issue,’ Johno said, thinking out loud. ‘A good Navy dive team could cross it. Then they’re within two hundred yards of the castle. Won’t do it till dark, so we need to stop them from entering the water in the first place.’

‘Probably enter from a boat,’ the second SAS Captain suggested. ‘Save some swimming time.’

Beesely ordered, ‘I want the local police to stop all boats on the lake until we say so.’

A manager hurried out as Otto returned.

Johno continued, ‘If they do make it to the lakeshore they can keep us pinned down all night. They can pop up, take a shot, then disappear.’

Beesely pointed towards Otto. ‘Ribs, on the lake, grenades, random use. Let’s try and confuse or deter them.’

‘Not till dusk,’ Johno cautioned. ‘Waste of time till then.’ He took Otto by the shoulder. ‘We need people dressed like tourists on the far shore, looking for divers.’

Otto raised his phone, stepping into the corridor again.

Johno added, ‘The best way to get you - us - would be to wait for us to fly or drive somewhere.’ He thrust his hands in his pockets.

‘Can’t sit here forever,’ Beesely considered. ‘Oh!’ he proclaimed, a revelation hitting him. ‘Of course! Why do you think they didn’t kill Max or Dame Helen?’

‘So we’d fly over with porn mags, lucozade and some grapes,’ Johno pointed out. ‘Get us all in one go.’

Beesely pointed at a manager. ‘I want the Learjet grounded, and our helicopters! Check them for mechanical faults or tampering and look to see if there could be a sniper near the airfield in a position to shoot them down on take-off.’

Otto returned as tea and coffee was brought in.

The first SAS Captain asked, ‘Are you expecting any *visitors* today? The welcome kind?’ Beesely glanced at the managers.

‘Yes,’ a man replied. ‘There are decorators, Israeli technicians and a Swiss Army medical team on its way for a joint exercise.’

‘Assume some of them have been compromised!’ the Captain insisted. ‘Replaced with the fifth column.’

Beesely lowered his head as he thought. ‘We want them all alive for ...’ He addressed the managers. ‘Do we have silencers?’

‘Yes, sir. Many.’

‘Good. Issue as many as possible, we want prisoners for interrogation.’

Herr Mole tipped his head forwards. ‘We must sweep everywhere for bugs, and a finger-tip search of the command centre.’

Beesely put down his tea. ‘Otto, Johnno - this room. Captains, you and your men, plus the old dogs, every room upstairs. Managers, search the command area.’ People stood. ‘Everyone back here in ... in exactly twenty minutes.’

When the staff had filed out Johnno took off his jacket and crawled under the desk. ‘Another round of drinks going cold,’ he muttered as Otto started on the cabinets, Beesely on his desk draws.

‘Anything even remotely suspicious or unknown, in a box and outside,’ Beesely quietly ordered as he sipped his tea.

Ten minutes later the phone buzzed.

‘Yes?’

‘Sir, they have found two listening devices in the restaurant.’

‘Good, good. Anything else?’

‘An unusual package in a guest quarter.’

‘Remove it carefully, drop it in the lake.’ He sat back, nibbling on his chocolate and observing Otto’s systematic, and symmetric, search of the office.

‘Nothing in here,’ Johnno insisted with a heavy sigh.

‘I agree,’ Otto added.

‘Start ripping out lights and wires, then floor tiles. Our lives may depend on it,’ Beesely quietly insisted.

Otto and Johnno both took a breath at the same time, before starting a more rigorous search as guards patrolled back and forth along the companionway with earphones and detectors.

Beesely pressed a button on his phone. 'Get me Oliver Stanton.' He waited.

'This is David, that you Beesely?'

'David, hi, they have you answering the phone now?' He checked his watch. 'And in the middle of the night, your time!'

'Oliver is missing.'

Beesely glanced at Otto, who had been listening in. 'He's probably dead. Murdered.'

'What are you saying?' David asked.

'We're under siege. The head of MI6 was attacked, along with the head of my private security firm in the UK, a ploy to get me over there and out in the open.'

'Who do you think is behind it?'

'Russian money, lots of it. Fella by the name of Boris Luchenkov.'

'He's on our active list. What do you think he wants?'

'All of us dead, I would assume. So watch your back, David, he's probably hired himself some ex-community people, good people.'

'I hear you.'

'You can assume Olly was tortured, maybe truth drugs, so look out for trouble.'

'I'll get back to you.' The line went dead.

Otto stepped forwards. 'We must notify the Swiss Government. If they hear reports of trouble here they will send police and soldiers. A lot ... of police and soldiers.'

Beesely made firm eye contact. 'Really? Well, it's good to know that we are so popular with the government, that they'd come running.' Otto stiffened, puzzling Beesely's tone. Beesely pressed a button, still focused on Otto. 'Get me Minister Blaum, please.' He waited. Otto returned to ripping things out of walls.

'Herr Beesely?' came from the phone.

'Minister Blaum?'

'Yes, how can I help?'

'Where are you, exactly?'

'I'm in my office. Why?'

‘Get yourself a ten-man police bodyguard then call your family and move them somewhere safe. Quickly. Don’t take any car journeys or helicopter rides.’

‘What are you saying, that I’m in danger?’

‘Yes, we’re under siege here. Many people close to me in the UK have been attacked this morning by professional assassins. We expect this facility to be attacked when it gets dark.’

‘Who ... *exactly* do you believe is attacking you?’ Blaum asked.

Beesely stared at the phone for several seconds, the move noticed by Otto. ‘The same people behind the radioactive ball bearings. Obviously.’

‘They are not so happy you stopped them!’

‘Quite.’

‘We must mobilise the police and army –’

‘No, Minister, people will get hurt. We want to deal with them quietly, and here. I don’t want your officers getting hurt. We could well be up against some the best mercenaries in the world. We also do not want to warn them, we want to catch them. Otherwise, they will just keep trying. Besides, this place is built like a fortress – no pun intended.’

‘You are playing a dangerous game, my friend,’ Blaum unhappily pointed out.

‘Better that *we* do it, than innocent civilians or police officers. We ... are geared up for this sort of thing. Would you not agree?’

Baum paused. ‘I will make preparations, just in case. If you need us, call.’

‘If we need you, it will probably be around dawn tomorrow. Try to contain any news leaks.’

‘Keep me informed, please.’

‘Will do. Now get your family somewhere safe. And do it quickly.’ He hung up as Thomas wandered in. Suddenly pale, Beesely glanced at Johnno, who had stopped dead.

Thomas stopped dead in his tracks, as if he had done something terribly wrong and was about to be punished. ‘What have I done?’

Beesely used all his strength to maintain his composure, holding a hand over his eyes for a moment. Johno stepped quickly to Thomas and led him outside, down to the dungeon.

Ten minutes later managers began to assemble, the office looking as if a grenade had already gone off. Beesely cleared his throat.

‘Are you OK, sir?’ Herr Mole enquired, standing to the side of Beesely’s desk.

‘Johno has probably broken the bad news to Thomas by now. The lad was very fond of Dame Helen’s daughter, who was killed this morning.’

Herr Mole sat down. ‘At that age, the boy will take it very badly.’

Johno appeared in the doorway, glancing back down the corridor before stepping in. Thomas followed, but now with a shoulder holster on housing his personal Walther PPK; a small 9mm pistol that suited his size and age. He stood next to Johno, his tear tracks clearly visible.

‘Thomas Beesely, reporting for duty,’ the boy croaked, his voice breaking.

‘Well done, lad,’ Beesely quietly commended, Otto stepping closer and putting a hand on the boy’s shoulder.

Thomas asked, ‘The bad men, they are coming here?’

‘Yes, my lad, they are coming here,’ Beesely informed him. ‘And before this day is out you may well get the chance to use your pistol.’ He turned to the group. ‘Right. What have we found?’

‘Two listening devices in the canteen, sir. Three strange devices attached to trees, they could be motion detectors, and two strange packages. They are in the lake, as you requested.’

Johno stepped closer to the manager. ‘When he said *in the lake*, he didn’t mean it literally, Swiss knob! We could’ve got forensics off them!’

‘Quite.’ Beesely waited for Johno to settle back. ‘OK, so no penetration of any important areas we know about. And we can assume that this command centre is secure.’

The two SAS Captains stepped in.

‘Three staff did not show up for work today,’ a manager pointed out.

Beesely rubbed the bridge of his nose. ‘Assume they have been captured, tortured for information. Whatever useful information they had - change our systems or access codes.’ People took notes.

‘Two police officers in the town have disappeared,’ a manager mentioned.

‘Probably stumbled upon some of our visitors,’ Beesely suggested. ‘Or they have had their identities stolen.’

His phone buzzed. ‘Sir?’

‘Yes?’

‘There is a senior police officer at the gate, but not from this Canton, he is from Bern. He is a Federal officer and he wishes to speak with you.’

‘Talk of the devil,’ Beesely quietly said towards Johno. Then louder, ‘Is he alone?’

‘No, sir, there are four other police officers with him.’

‘Wait two minutes then send them to the castle courtyard.’ He hung up. ‘And so it begins,’ he stated with a sigh. ‘Let them get into the courtyard, then grab them, strip them and carefully search everything they have, tie them up.’ He faced Otto. ‘Send someone to identify them, just in case.’ Facing the SAS Captains he said, ‘You lot are back-up on this deal.’ He pointed at the door and they rushed out.

Johno stepped forwards. ‘Blaum may have sent them.’

Beesely nodded an acknowledgement. ‘We’re not going to kill them. Well, not until we’ve checked anyway.’ He forced a breath. ‘OK, let’s get back to first principles. Herr Mole, if you were paid a hundred million dollars, how would you attack this place?’

Mole stood, not a great difference in head height. ‘This facility can withstand attack by bomb, chemical agent or similar – as has already been proven. A rocket attack would

not work, nor any attack from the air. They need to get us outside.'

Beesely rubbed his chin. 'And being the kind of people we are, anyone bothering us would result in us chasing them.'

Mole agreed. 'And into a trap. No, I do not think they intend to try and enter this place by force, unless they have not been well informed.'

Johno stepped forwards. 'Which gives me a sneaky idea.'

'Which is?' Beesely asked, lifting his head towards Johno.

'You split your mercenary force in two. Those who are aggressive, but not too bright, you send in to distract us. The really good secret squirrels use the smoke to get into place.'

'Sacrificing some,' Beesely agreed, 'for the greater good of the mission. Yes, makes sense. So the real danger won't present itself until the shooting stops.'

Johno folded his arms. 'They could put mines in trees with motion sensors and two week delays. Plant bombs with remote detonators, sit on the mountain for weeks till just the right moment.'

'So we have to avoid the smoke and mirrors,' Beesely suggested, staring down at the desk.

His phone buzzed. 'Sir! Gunfire in the courtyard!' Managers jumped up.

'Sit down, ladies and gentlemen!' Beesely barked. 'Sit! We will not survive today by reacting to things like that. Keep a cool head.' He tapped one of his computer screens. 'Can we call up the video feed of the courtyard?' he asked a shocked looking Otto.

Otto switched it on, mouse clicked a few icons and then there it was; five dead Swiss police officers, the SAS contingent stood over them.

Beesely's eyes widened. 'Oh dear. I do hope they were not actually Swiss police.'

Otto pressed Beesely's phone. 'SAS Captains to the control room.'

'Yes, quite. Let's get some coffees organized, going to be a very long day.'

The Captains appeared a minute later, weapons in hand and a little out of breath. One had blood on his hands.

Beesely stood. 'What happened?' he asked without any hint of blame.

'Your guards smiled nicely and asked them to stop. Next thing we know they had weapons out, pistol to the necks of your guards, so we dropped them.'

'Anyone hurt?'

'One of your guards critical, stray round through-and-through.'

'Well done anyway. First blood. Any of them still alive?'

The officer tipped his eyebrows. 'Be a fucking miracle, sir. About ten rounds in each man.'

'Ah well.' Beesely turned to Otto. 'Put them on ice for now, out of the way, clean up the mess, no trace. We'll identify them later. Our injured man - no hospital, all wounded are treated here as best as possible. Captains, the stairwell for the castle, the lobby, that's your killing ground. How many men?'

'Twenty one in total, sir, with your lot.'

'Too many for that area, be falling over each other. Split them. First team, second, reserve. Pick your kill zones, choke points. Get rations in pockets, water, raid the kitchen. You could be there two days.'

'Yessir.' They hurried out.

Beesely sat and sighed. 'OK, first round to us, gentlemen. But let's not get complacent. What other visitors are we expecting today?'

'We can cancel the exercise with the Swiss Medical Corp,' Otto suggested.

'No, bring them in, all nice and cosy. Oh, the vehicles of the Swiss police, move them to the end of the compound, hide them quickly.' A manager ran out as Beesely eased back. 'Right, any other suggestions?'

Otto tipped his head forwards. 'The best assassins will wait until morning, dawn I think, after we have suffered a night of fighting. We will be at our weakest.'

Beesely was a little surprised by that statement, especially coming from Otto.

'Yep,' Johno agreed. 'Wear us down first, probing attacks.'

A manager said, 'They are assuming we will not bring in the Swiss authorities.'

'And they'd be right,' Beesely stated. 'They know how I will react to this. That's their strength and our weakness. My weakness. They must know that we are publicity shy. We don't want to be in the papers any more than our attackers do.'

Using his mouse, and looking over the rims of his glasses, Beesely clicked icons as he had witnessed Otto doing. Otto stood ready to assist, pointing where Beesely should click. Up came the restaurant, Scottish Kev and two others now visible. Beesely pressed a button on his phone. 'Restaurant, please.' The phone there rang for a while in stereo before anyone figured they should answer.

'Hello?' came a Scottish accent.

'This is Beesely, I can see you on the monitors.'

'Oh, right sir. What you want us to do?'

'How are you old boys coping?'

'Never better, sir. Wee bit ah' action.'

'You never were too bright. Listen, some bad news from the UK - Wilko Thomas had his throat slit, others missing.'

Kev took a breath. 'We gonna get the chance to meet these fellas, sir?'

'You help yourself, you're going to see plenty of action, mostly tonight, so shift sleep through the day.'

'Will do, sir.'

Beesely hung up. 'That goes for us as well, we have to pace ourselves so that we are fresh around dawn. OK, decoys. What can we do to draw out the bad boys?'

Johnno stepped forwards. 'Wait till dusk, boat to the lake, four men run for it, it speeds off.'

Beesely considered the idea. 'If they think I've gone, they may go. Good, but we don't want them gone, we want them captured.'

Johnno suggested, 'Then dress those five dead coppers like guards. Later on we spread them around outside the castle, looks like we took a beating and they get cocky.'

'Excellent. Let's get that organized.' People took notes.

His phone buzzed. 'Sir, Israelis are here.'

'Send them up to the castle. Get me the lobby.'

‘Sir? Lobby here,’ came a Swiss voice.

‘Get me an SAS Captain, would you.’

They waited. ‘Sir?’ came a British voice.

‘Listen, your next visitors will be here in two minutes. Go to great lengths *not* to kill these, I want them alive. I know they’re salesmen, but resist the temptation.’

‘Will do, sir.’

Johno tipped his head forwards. ‘Fucking Israelis will go mad if we drop their staff.’

‘Then let’s hope they are who they say they are.’ Beesely pressed his phone. ‘Get me Elle Rosen, Mossad.’

They waited. ‘Hello?’ came a few seconds later.

‘Elle? Beesely here.’

‘Ah, Beesely, how are you?’

‘Not good, we are under siege. Tell your boss Oliver Stanton has been murdered, and head of MI6 is critical.’

‘What on earth is happening?’

‘That oil was Siberian!’

‘But we traced the boat, owned and crewed by Iranians!’

‘Then we have a big mystery. The oil belonged to Luchenkov –’

‘He’s a nationalist, wants to be President of Russia!’

‘He’s put a prize on my head, already got to some of my friends. Anyway, got some Israeli arms dealers about to arrive, will need you to stay on the line and identify them ... make sure they could not have been compromised.’

‘The men from Zohar Chemicals? I know them, I can identify them.’

‘Good. Not ... er ... Mossad agents ... are they? *Spying* ... on us?’ Beesely toyed.

‘Certainly not,’ Elle insisted. ‘But we stay in close touch them.’

‘I’m putting you on hold.’ Using his mouse he clicked on the icon for ‘Map’, zooming-in on the courtyard. Final click and there came the image: two worried looking Israelis down to their underpants, six machine guns pointing at their heads.

‘Now that’s the way to treat salesmen,’ he muttered. He lifted his gaze to Otto. ‘Bring them down here, please.’

A minute later they entered, waved over by Beesely. 'I recognise this obnoxious git,' he said, pointing at the taller man, stood now shivering in his underpants. Releasing 'hold' he said, 'Elle, you there?'

'Yes, still here.'

'The two men are here, one I recognise anyway. Do your thing.' He turned the phone and pushed it to the edge of the desk.

They began to talk in Hebrew. After a minute of chit-chat being shouted back and forth the second man was looking nervous, the taller Israeli salesman stepping away from him, eyeing him suspiciously.

'Beesely!' Elle called. 'The second man!'

Johno kicked the man in the groin. Whilst bent double the man received another kick to the face, flying backwards. Guards grabbed him, forcing him upright.

'Hold him!' Beesely ordered. Then quieter, 'Give this other man his clothes and possessions back. Quickly!'

'Beesely,' Elle called. 'Do what you want with him, but I want his fingerprints, a photo and any possessions.'

'We have a *chair* that he can sit in. Thanks, Elle.'

'No problem, you let me know what's happening. Oh, and Beesely, some day you just call up to say 'hello', eh?'

Beesely hung up then walked around to the struggling man. 'You made a big mistake, my friend. We're going to burn the skin off your body, inch by painful inch.' He tipped his head at the guards and they dragged the impostor out. The genuine salesman dressed quickly. 'Apologies,' Beesely offered. 'But we have a security problem today.'

'It's no problem. I am just happy I am who I think I am,' he panted.

'Get this man a coffee,' Beesely ordered. Then, facing the salesman, he explained, 'I'm afraid we can't let you leave just yet. To quote a phrase - *we have a lot of problems here*. You will get to see how your equipment works - for real.'

'For real?'

'We are under attack,' Beesely calmly informed the man. 'Sit behind a monitor and observe.' The salesman was led out.

Beesely sat. 'So, two-nil to us.'

‘Won’t all be that simple,’ Johno curtly pointed out. Then he added, ‘And I *seriously* wish I had not just kicked that bastard!’ He bent double, holding his knee.

‘Your leg?’

‘Just set back four days of healing. Bastard!’

‘Sir!’ the phone buzzed. ‘Gunfire on the castle roof!’

Beesely moved the mouse. ‘How do you call up the bleeding roof?’

Otto adjusted the parameters quickly. Then there it was, a man dangling by a rope on the cliff, obviously dead, another advancing cautiously but cut down a second later. Otto split the screen as people stood to look, the second screen switched on by Johno and the image called up.

‘That’s Kev!’ Johno pointed out.

Kev could be seen crouching, checking the body, a second later knocked down by a shot from above.

‘Stupid sod!’ Johno shouted. ‘Get them off the roof, there’re snipers!’ They could see another man dragging Kev by the foot, dropping down through a skylight a second later.

Beesely lifted his phone. ‘Get me the kitchen.’

Otto called up the kitchen in a new window. Several SAS troopers were rushing about. One answered the phone.

‘Yes?’

‘Get off the fucking roof, we have snipers!’

‘You noticed that too, did you!’

Beesely slammed the phone down. ‘Stupid old sod, trying to be a bloody hero.’

‘Beesely?’ came from his phone, an English voice.

‘Yes?’

‘They’re trying to shoot out the glass above the restaurant.’

‘It’s solid!’ Beesely insisted.

‘I can see that, sir. But maybe they know that as well.’

‘Stay out of line of sight of the mountain.’

‘Will do.’ The line went dead.

Beesely turned to Otto. ‘How strong is that glass?’

‘It would be broken by a fifty calibre, nothing less.’

‘No way they lugged a fifty cal’ up that mountain!’ Johno suggested.

‘Let’s hope so. Johno, go check on them.’

Johno straightened. 'No.' Beesely made eye contact, Johno adding, 'To quote a dead friend of mine, my place is right here, keeping you alive.'

Beesely creased a cheek and smiled. 'Good lad.' He pressed his phone. 'Get me one of the SAS Captains.' He turned to Johno. 'What *are* their bleeding names, anyway?'

'Turner and ... er ... Colette.'

'Captain Turner here.'

'Is Kev alive?'

'Yes, sir. Clean through, nothing serious.'

'Anyone else?'

'No, sir. We had the old guard watching the roof and the kitchen, in reserve. Seems to be two or three snipers up there. We got two, well Kev got one and his oppo the other on the roof, Kev got a second as he rappelled down.'

'I feel a bleeding pay rise coming on,' Beesely muttered. 'Bring him down here, and any other wounded.'

'Will do, sir.'

A bang was heard down the phone.

'What the hell was that?' Beesely shouted.

'Sounded like a fifty cal' from the lake,' Turner replied.

'Talk later.' Beesely hung up. 'Get the lake,' he hurriedly urged Otto.

A few mouse clicks and up came nine images of the lakeside. 'Where are they?' Beesely asked.

'They're camouflaged,' Otto whispered.

Another distant bang revealed a puff of smoke. 'There!' Beesely pointed. 'Get them on the radio.'

A manager turned up the volume of a radio attached to his hip. 'Lake side fifty calibre, how goes it?' he asked in German.

A voice crackled back, 'Got two snipers.'

A high-pitched whining noise began, the volume quickly turned down.

'Jammers!' Johno pointed out.

'What do we have that cannot be jammed?' Beesely demanded.

'The satellite phones,' Otto responded.

Johno added, 'And the radios can be intercepted.'

‘Yes,’ Beesely agreed. ‘Let everyone know, no radio use - at all - from now on.’ Managers ran out.

‘Sir?’ burst from his phone.

‘Yes!’

‘We have a report of up to ten men in the woods at the base of the cliff, to the west of the emergency bunker entrance.’

Johno stepped closer. ‘Why are these idiots attacking us in daylight?’

‘How far from the entrance?’ Beesely asked.

‘A hundred yards, sir, moving slowly.’

He turned to Otto, ‘Ten men there. Now! Through the tunnel.’ Otto moved towards the door. ‘Wait!’ Beesely called. ‘They will have explosives, got to get them before they are inside the tunnel!’

Otto ran out, guards running along the companionway a moment later.

Johno moved around to where he could control the computer screen, getting up the images of the tunnel, its entrance and then the view outside, *dragging-and-dropping* image windows. ‘Can’t see them on this resolution, they’ll have to be closer. Probably camouflaged anyway.’

‘Cannon fodder,’ Beesely snarled.

‘An old term,’ Herr Mole stated. ‘But correct in its use today.’ Beesely glanced at him briefly before turning back to the screens, Mole adding, ‘If you want prisoners, I have an idea.’ They all focused on him. ‘Our Israeli friend can help.’

‘Him? How?’ Beesely demanded.

‘He has test-gas, brought to test the nerve agent detectors. It has the effect of short-term nerve agent, but does no harm to a person in the long term.’

‘By God that’s excellent,’ Beesely commended. ‘Where is it?’

‘Locked in a room in the lower bunker,’ Mole informed them. A manager jumped up.

‘Get it and use it! Quickly!’ He pressed a button on his phone. ‘Tell the guards at the west bunker entrance not to fire, but to use the stun gas that’s on its way.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Get me Captain Turner!’ He waited.

‘Turner here, sir.’

‘Find some way to offer suppressing fire towards the west. As you look down from the top floor you’ll see the cliff to your left, trees and then grass and the road. Down beyond the office block you’ll see a dark coloured Swiss chalet. Beyond that is a small army creeping along.’

‘We’ll pinch the M-16s off your guys, we’ve only got MP5s for close quarter.’

‘I’ll get you some more, hang on.’ He pointed at a manager then slid his finger towards the door, the man bolting out.

* * *

K2 guard Hans looked through the telescopic sight on his M82, self-loading .50 calibre rifle. His elbows dug into the soil and tightened. He took a breath, focusing on the mountain to the right of the cliff-top, his cheek moulded into the rifle stock. A tree protected his far right, another tree protecting his immediate left.

Another crack was followed by another clump of grass floating through the air.

‘They are shooting from more than eight hundred metres,’ he casually informed his colleague, the man hunkered down six foot away. ‘And with 5.56mm or smaller.’

‘Too light for that range,’ his colleague commented, still prone behind his own .50 calibre rifle.

‘And too much wind. See the flag on top the castle?’

His colleague opened his left eye and re-focused, his right eye now closed. The small triangular flags atop of the spires were wagging briskly. ‘Yeah, maybe ten kilometres per hour.’

‘They are not factoring that in.’

‘They can’t see it, that’s why!’ his colleague quipped.

Hans allowed himself a quick smile. Movement. Something caught his eye. He re-focused and strained to see. They waited.

The top of a head appeared from behind a rock; a flash, a crack a second later, a clump of bark falling down between him and his partner. ‘Zeroed him!’ Hans called. He checked

the target, no more than three inches of the top of this sniper's head visible.

'How's it look?' his colleague enquired.

'No good, just the top of his head, he is staying down.'

Hans adjusted his aim a fraction right: trees, but no one else visible. He adjusted very carefully the other way: a rock, a small promontory, maybe two metres from the sniper. 'Bank shot!'

He aimed carefully for the right hand side of the rock, considered the ricochet and fired. Urgently he tried to re-acquire the sniper's last known position, sure it was the correct rock. Then he noticed a rifle barrel pointed up at an odd angle.

A face. Hands. The sniper stood, holding his face. The ricochet had worked. Hans aimed mid torso and fired. Quickly he tried to re-acquire, finding nothing.

'I saw that one go down!' his colleague shouted.

Hans observed the sniper's rifle for a few seconds. It rested pointing up at an odd angle, no movement evident.

* * *

Above the entrance to the bunker many guards waited in the wooden chalet, out of sight and ready. Ten more were lined up at the rear of the office block, all now crouched down.

Hurried footsteps could be heard in the tunnel as the new arrivals ran past a dozen guards armed with M4 assault rifles. Three men ran to the front, talking in forced whispers. At the tunnel entrance they stopped behind a guard with a telescopic sight.

'How close?'

'Fifty yards.'

The lead guard, panting heavily, turned around, all three of them kneeling in a line. 'We throw together, maybe twenty yards, out so that the wind takes it.'

'Which way is the wind blowing?'

They all looked, studying the bushes beyond the tunnel entrance. The wind blew north-east to south-west. Perfect.

The guard with the telescopic sight turned. 'They are getting ready to attack. Looks like grenades!'

The three guards with nerve gas glanced at each other ‘OK. We run, throw and lie down. And hope.’

As Beesely and the managers observed from the control room the three men ran, threw their grenades and jumped down, the last man too slow. He got hit twice and lay clutching his abdomen.

The guard closest to the door thrust his head out. ‘Nerve gas! Nerve gas!’

The misty cloud wafted quickly towards the attackers, who were unsure of whether or not it was a trick. Little more than three seconds later the first attacker screamed, standing and turning, his hands and face covered in red blotches, his eyes puffed up and his lips swollen. A shot from the SAS took him down. Other attackers began to retreat, opening fire towards the tunnel entrance as they did to lay down covering fire.

The SAS opened up from a break in the roof tiles, hitting several men in the legs. At the same time guards burst out of the tunnel, along the bushes at the base of the cliff, stopping and firing intermittently at attacker’s legs.

* * *

On the hillside a man listened in to the radio chatter of the attackers. He raised a satellite phone. ‘Leaf to Tree, over,’ he said in a distinct Texas drawl.

‘Tree here, go ahead,’ came back a heavily accented voice.

‘K2 have started using nerve gas in their compound.’

‘Nerve gas! Are you sure?’

‘Yeah, they just got the team attacking the entrance to the emergency bunker.’

‘They risk killing themselves. Good. Press ahead with the attack. Out.’

‘You’re welcome,’ the Texan sarcastically let out. He focused his telescopic sight on the camp. ‘Nerve gas? What the fuck these boys up to?’

5

‘They’re on the run,’ Johnno informed the room.

Then everyone could hear an explosion.

‘Where was that?’ Beesely asked, Johnno now calling up images.

‘Beesely!’ burst from the phone.

‘Yes!’

‘Captain Turner, sir. Remember those decorators that were supposed to come in, to finish the restaurant? Well, you’re going to need some fucking builders as well!’

‘What happened?’ Beesely puzzled.

‘Blob of C4 on the restaurant’s roof glass. It’s wrecked!’

‘Watch for unwelcome visitors!’

‘We’re retreating to the stair well, two men down with minor wounds.’

‘Keep them with you. If they can shoot, they fight!’ He hung up and took a breath. ‘Let’s organize some food, coffee, everyone wash your faces with cold water. We need to stay focused and sharp.’ He stood. ‘Herr Mole, well done, good idea with the test gas. Otto, prisoners to be held in the tunnels.’

The room cleared of the managers.

Johnno sat on the desk. ‘Turner’s men are going to get worn down. They already have four injured.’

Beesely tipped his eyebrows and suggested, ‘Before dawn tomorrow we’ll be lucky if four are left alive.’

Johnno studied Otto as he slumped into a chair. ‘You holding up?’

Otto took a long time answering. ‘I am very angry.’

Johnno glanced at Beesely, then back to Otto. ‘At who?’

‘At the ... people out there ... who do not realise what I will do to them for attacking me. I am not angry at them, I am angry at them not knowing who we are.’

‘We’re a secret organization,’ Johnno sarcastically pointed out. ‘You want to put an advert on the TV, *screw with us and you get the chair!*’

‘Yes, I do,’ Otto snarled, an unusual display of emotion.

Beesely sat down and eased back in his chair. ‘It’s not just a few mafia hit men now,’ he pointed out.

‘That seems a long time ago,’ Otto quietly admitted.

‘For us all,’ Beesely agreed. ‘If you had not contacted us then Johnno and I would be on a beach right now.’

‘With Jane and Ricky,’ Otto pointedly suggested.

Beesely took a deep breath. ‘With Jane, at least.’

‘I started all this,’ Otto quietly let out.

Beesely carefully studied his offspring. ‘And if you had not contacted me? Then what? London possibly contaminated, a new Russian dictator, World War bleeding Three! Right now, Otto, just about everyone on the planet is very grateful that you did contact me, they just don’t know you ... and what you did. Your actions saved everyone in London.’

‘I gave *you* ... the opportunity to save everyone,’ Otto unhappily noted. ‘You and face fungus.’

Johno ran a hand down his moustache, a grin for Otto.

Beesely again took a moment to study Otto, a quick glance at Johno. ‘Which matters most? The person who bought the lottery ticket, or the person who gave him the money and prompted him to do it?’

‘It is a difficult question,’ Otto admitted.

Beesely again made brief eye contact with Johno. ‘Otto, I have no regrets. We are where we are supposed to be, doing what we are supposed to be doing. Even Johno gave up ten million to be here, slowly getting killed in an underground bunker.’

‘Is it too late for that cheque?’ Johno asked as managers started to wander back in.

One said, ‘Sir, we have five prisoners alive. All are seriously ill from the test nerve agent, as well as a few of our guards.’

‘Treat them all, get some advice from our Israeli friend on how best to go about that.’ The man walked back out as others entered.

Johno counted on his fingers. ‘I make it twenty-one bad guys chopped down so far. How many you reckon in total?’

Beesely made a face. ‘Who knows. Some stupid sod has told these mercenaries that we are a soft touch, otherwise they wouldn’t be so blatant. Their commander is toying with us, throwing away these idiots.’

‘Sir!’ his phone buzzed.

‘Yes?’

‘We have reports of an explosion and gun battle near the Zug airfield. One of our men dead, two wounded, six intruders killed, two captured.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Our boys are holding up well,’ Johno commented.

‘Against the cannon fodder, so far,’ Beesely pointed out.

‘Sir, our snipers on the lakeside got another two,’ crackled out of the desk phone.

‘Very good, thank you.’

With a lull in the fighting everyone had a bite to eat. Beesely and Johno sat back as Otto and the managers dealt with situation as well as any seasoned British Army officer might.

‘Beesely?’ came from the phone half an hour later.

‘Yes?’

‘Turner, sir. Boys near the roof say they can hear choppers.’

‘Watch the skies, Captain, and if any choppers get close, run down to a lower level and take cover.’

‘Will do, sir.’

Beesely cut the call, pressing INTERCOM. ‘Get the boys near the lake with fifty calibre rifles to look out for helicopters. Tell them ... any hostile action by helicopter and to shoot it down.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Beesely turned towards Otto, tapping the screen. ‘Can we get an aerial view?’

Otto adjusted the computer displays. ‘Nothing visible.’

‘Wait for a direction,’ Beesely suggested, before lifting his head towards Johno. ‘What will those fifty calibres do to a helicopter?’

‘For a civvy helicopter – no armour? Go straight through, make hell of a mess. In the US they’re trying to ban them from civilian rifle nuts, they could bring down a plane.’

‘Bring down a plane?’ Beesely queried.

‘Back when the Russians were in Afghanistan the Yanks helping the resistance fighters had bolt action fifty cal’s. They’d sneak up to the Russian airfields, hide in the flight path a mile away, then when the planes were taking off they’d

shoot through the wings - anything up to a thousand feet. Crippled a few Russian aircraft, brought down a few others. You know who the CIA taught that technique to?’

‘Osama Bin Laden himself,’ Beesely answered, a peeved expression.

‘Yep. And now they use that same technique against the US forces in Iraq,’ Johno added. ‘Fortunately, not many fifty cal’s in the hands of the rag-heads. And those they have ... the CIA reckons were bought in US sport gun shops.’

‘Marvellous,’ Beesely muttered.

His phone buzzed. ‘Sir, boat on the lake.’

Otto called up a single image, to that of the lake in front of the castle. He zoomed in. ‘Police launch.’

‘Check with Zug police, quickly!’ Beesely ordered no one in particular.

‘Fifty cal’s are exposed to the rear,’ Johno pointed out.

‘Can we reinforce them?’

‘Not without running across the compound,’ Johno insisted. ‘And if we bring *our* boats in they’re well exposed to the snipers.’

Beesely faced Otto. ‘What about the sniper teams we sent up the hill?’

Otto answered, ‘They are going the long way around, cutting off the snipers’ retreat.’

Beesely pressed a button. ‘Get six camp guards with rifles to the lake edge, and along the lake to protect the fifty cal’ position.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘There,’ Otto called. ‘The boat. Coming towards us.’

‘And there,’ Beesely pointed, ‘is a helicopter. Johno, what is that thing?’

Johno walked around and peered at the screen. ‘Christ, it’s an old Russian Mi2. Forty-odd years old.’

‘Armed?’

‘Could be, that one ain’t.’

‘How many men inside?’

Johno made a face and shrugged. ‘Ten to fifteen odd.’

‘Otto, any reason why that thing should be flying past here?’ Beesely asked, pointing at the image.

‘I cannot think of any.’

‘Tell the fifty cal’ boys to hit the tail rotor if it looks like it may land. Tell them to hit the pilots if they open their doors. And tell the rest of our people to be ready for it if it lands. Remember, prisoners.’

A manager stepped out with the instructions, Thomas nudging into a position where he could see the action, rudely moving Otto aside.

6

Hans and partner, the ‘fifty calibre boys’, observed the helicopter’s approach whilst keeping an eye on the boat.

The boat suddenly changed course, now parallel to them; several men dressed in Swiss Police uniforms could be seen moving about on the rear. They waited, fingers on triggers. Nothing, it was just heading past. It slowly advanced two hundred yards, turned towards shore, before turning back the opposite way.

Hans could see a man with a long-barrelled rifle, definitely not local Swiss police. He aimed where he figured the engine should be, and fired, a deafening bang and powerful recoil into his shoulder. His weapon automatically reloaded, a second shot fired to the same spot, smoke starting to rise from the rear of the boat.

A shot cracked past his ear. He aimed, firing at the first man and knocking him ten feet off the boat and into the lake. He fired again, this time into the wheelhouse. Another crack passed his ear, so he ducked and waited. Ten seconds later the boat was well ablaze, men jumping into the water. Hans aimed again.

‘Hey! Prisoners,’ his buddy shouted.

They surveyed the men in the water, of which none seemed armed.

‘OK, just checking,’ Hans offered.

They peered skyward as another crack tore bark off a nearby tree.

‘We are popular today,’ Hans noted.

‘How is your ammunition?’

‘Another ten rounds, then we have to start shouting at them.’

The drone of the helicopter wafted up and down in volume as it bounced off the hills around the lake. Now it grew stronger and more distinct. They took up position, ignoring the swimmers, and the million small flies that had recently hatched. Ducks were moving their way, away from the surviving attackers off the police launch.

‘I don’t like that lead duck,’ Hans suggested. ‘Shoot the bastard if he gets too close.’

The helicopter drew near.

‘That’s a very strange looking helicopter.’

They zeroed in on it, observing it for many seconds before noting a door opening. Before they had a chance to do anything a dark figure dropped out and into the water. They both fired at the cockpit, shattering the glass. The helicopter nosed down immediately and crashed a second later, huge plumes of water sent up by the rotor blades. It rolled onto its back, blew out bubbles and sank quickly.

* * *

‘Did you see that?’ Johno called, pointing at an image on the screen. ‘Diver in the water!’

‘What about the others? Inside?’ Beesely hurriedly asked.

‘Unlikely to have got out, but they do probably have scuba gear on,’ Johno suggested.

‘Could they survive?’ Otto asked.

‘How deep is it there?’ Johno asked.

‘The lake centre? Very deep, three hundred metres,’ Otto answered.

Johno theatrically raised his eyebrows. ‘Then no, unless they get out quickly. That first jumper is a threat to the fifty cal’ position. He can pop-up, shoot and then disappear.’

Beesely pointed at a manager. ‘Tell the fifty cals’ to move to a position where they are not exposed to the lake.’ He pressed a button. ‘Get me Turner.’ They waited.

‘Turner here, sir.’

‘Get someone up high with an M-16, cover the lake in front of the castle. Got a Navy Seal in the drink.’

‘We saw him land. Crazy to attempt that in daylight!’

‘Yes, very brave. Now shoot the nice man, would you.’ He hung up, turning to Johnno. ‘*Could* they get him?’

‘Oh yes. The diver will make a wake when he surfaces, which is why no one would ever do that in daylight, on a lake with iddy-biddy little waves on. Fucking suicide.’

‘Sir,’ came from the phone. ‘Ten men on the roof.’

‘Get me Turner!’

‘Turner here.’

‘Heavy assault coming in from the roof!’

7

Turner dropped the phone and ran to the stairwell. ‘They’re coming in from the roof, mob handed! Get into pairs in the rooms, evacuate the stair well!’

Bodies moved quickly as a dull thud echoed and reverberated; a grenade. Then another.

‘They’re clearing a path with grenades! Take cover!’ Captain Turner shouted as he sprinted down the stairwell. More dull thuds echoed down the stairwell after him as grenades cleared out any possible resistance in the now empty restaurant.

Smitty and Robbo were trapped in the kitchen storeroom. ‘Pisst!’ Smitty called. ‘They’re going to grenade, then storm in two seconds later.’ They both moved behind a heavy metal locker, inching it out.

Smitty pressed his face up against his oppo. ‘Door, bounce bounce, bang, one two, they kick in door, we fire.’

Robbo shook his head, holding up two grenades. ‘Door, bounce bounce, bang, we throw into corridor, duck, run and shoot.’

Smitty curled his lip, grabbing a grenade.

A few seconds later the door burst open, the sound of two grenades rolling on the tiled floor clearly heard. They closed their eyes. First bang, second bang, ears ringing. They moved,

pulled pins, threw, finally ducking behind a counter. A shout registered through the thick smoke.

First bang, muffled screams, second bang. They charged, firing through the smoke as soon as they were in the doorway. Man on floor. Short burst to the head. Second man, slumped against wall, short burst.

‘Two down!’ Smitty shouted, walking backwards and firing through the smoke into the stairwell, kicking the door closed, back behind the metal locker a second later.

‘How many more grenades?’ Smitty whispered, coughing out smoke.

‘That’s it.’

‘Right - door, bounce bounce, bang, one two, they kick in door, we fire.’

‘Now you’re making sense.’

A burst of fire near the roof caught their attention, a prolonged burst. Then another, a third overlapping. They looked up.

‘Must have been fifty, sixty rounds,’ Smitty whispered.

‘Not our lot then.’

They listened as another long burst echoed down to them. Then silence reclaimed the restaurant.

‘Smitty?’ came a loud, familiar voice.

They emerged, weapons prone, inching towards the door, the smoke lingering.

‘Smitty?’ the voice called again. ‘It’s Turner. You two tossers still alive?’

‘Yes, Boss. Just having a kip.’

‘Cover us.’

They stepped cautiously to the door, checking the bodies, three in total, before aiming up the stairwell to the roof. ‘Clear!’

Troopers came up the stairs, hugging the walls and covering each other.

‘What happened?’ Robbo asked his boss.

A little out of breath, Captain Turner said, ‘K2 boys climbed up the side of the cliff, wiped out our friends from above.’

‘We got these three!’ Smitty protested.

‘Got it on tape?’ Turner said with a smile as he stepped over the bodies.

‘How’s that for gratitude,’ Robbo commented.

‘Anyway,’ Turner pointed out. ‘You said you were having a kip, and that’s going in the official report.’

* * *

Beesely’s phone buzzed. ‘Yes?’

‘Captain Turner, sir. Roof cleared.’

‘Well done.’

‘We got three, maybe four. Your boys on the cliff got the rest.’

‘Mop up. Any wounded?’

‘Just a few cuts from ricochet.’

* * *

A crack passed the fifty cal’ position, coming from the lake, followed by a burst of automatic fire, too close for comfort. Then they could hear rustling in the bushes nearby. They glanced at each other, drawing their pistols.

‘Hans? Alles in ordnung?’ came from someone unseen.

They breathed again. ‘Yes, but keep down. Snipers and dangerous ducks!’

Guards crawled along the lake edge and up to Hans and his partner. They slapped down extra magazines for the fifty cal’s. ‘We got the diver in the lake. You’re supposed to aim at the cliff again.’

They reloaded the fifty cal’s and took up position, now flanked by six guards dug in against the good cover afforded by the lake’s muddy bank. They found three targets straight away, firing quickly, leaving the new arrivals to cope with the million small flies.

8

An hour later Johno walked into Beesely’s office, ‘Most of the snipers on the cliff have been sorted.’

Beesely smiled at Thomas, then pointed out various images on the computer, the boy now officially in-charge of video feed. Then they could all hear a dull thud, most glancing up at the ceiling.

‘What was that?’ Otto puzzled.

Beesely glanced at the monitors, now noticing a large black cloud of smoke in front of the castle.

‘Beesely, this is Turner,’ burst from his phone.

‘Yes, go ahead.’

‘Mortars coming in, get everyone under cover!’

‘Mortars?’ Beesely repeated. ‘Christ! Warn everyone. Now!’

‘That’s not good,’ Johno cautioned.

‘Why?’ Beesely asked, concerned.

‘With our heads down they can sneak up.’

‘*They* can’t sneak up with shells landing!’ Beesely insisted.

‘They’ll try,’ Johno firmly countered with.

Beesely put his face up against the screen. ‘Johno, some of those guys out there may know you. Personally.’

‘Doubt it, but possible,’ Johno agreed. ‘Why?’

‘That mortar hit your new car.’

‘Bugger. Wonder how to put that on the fucking insurance form? Hit by a mortar!’

Beesely took a breath, turning back to the images. ‘How far off could they be?’

‘Two miles.’

‘Two miles? We’ll never find them in those woods!’

Beesely’s satellite phone warbled. ‘Yes?’

‘Beesely? It’s David. Help will be with you in a few minutes.’

‘Really? What kind of help?’

‘Help from our bases in Germany, under the radar. Tell all your people to get inside quickly. Call you later.’

‘What now?’ Johno complained.

‘The Yanks have organized some backup for us,’ Beesely excitedly explained.

‘About bloody time!’

‘Beesely, it’s Turner.’

‘Go ahead.’

‘Assault helicopters coming in, American Apaches. Fucking hundreds of ‘em!’

Beesely clasped his hands, smiling broadly. ‘Get all staff inside, no one left outside at all. Quickly! Oh, and those helicopters, they’re on our side.’

* * *

On the hillside the Texan put down his telescopic sight and raised his head, listening hard as the drone grew louder and more distinct. He swung around his rifle sight and peered out across the lake, his lens suddenly filled with the image of an Apache. He snapped the sight down and lifted his head. ‘Sweet mother of God!’

He grabbed his satellite phone. ‘Leaf to Tree, American Army assault helicopters have arrived to assist K2, over.’

No response came back.

‘Hello ... anyone there?’ He took in the line of helicopters. ‘Scotty, if you’re there ... beam me the fuck up!’

* * *

Beesely’s phone rang again. ‘Yes?’

‘Sir Morris Beesely?’ came a distorted voice, an American accent.

‘Yes.’

‘Apache squadron leader. Where do you want it?’

‘All around the outskirts of the compound, but mostly the cliffs and hills above us. And there are some mortar positions a mile or two away.’

‘Take cover. Out.’

Beesely hung up and faced the managers. ‘Contact our people up on the hillside, get them into cover or to hold up white flags. Quickly!’

Thomas zoomed in on the Apaches. ‘There! Look!’

‘What a beautiful sight,’ Johno quietly stated, peering over Thomas, his hands on the boy’s shoulders.

Turning point

1

The drone of Apaches grew louder as guards ignored the potential threat of snipers and ran for their lives. The last man into the emergency bunker glanced back to see eight Apaches on the horizon, advancing on the compound in a line abreast a hundred feet above the lake.

Noticing assailants advancing along the lakeshore an Apache rotated its chain-gun and fired a three second burst, tearing foliage from the trees and throwing up clumps of turf. Two bodies were now visible.

After careful radio chatter with K2 staff the Apaches got into position and selected rockets. Eight rockets shot forwards, climbing slightly from their current altitude and impacting on the cliff top a second later.

In the command centre everyone glanced up at the ceiling as a dull rumble reverberated around the room.

‘Wouldn’t want to be up there right now,’ Johno suggested.

‘Beesely, it’s Turner.’

‘Go ahead.’

‘Are these fuckers on our side?’ he screamed, his voice badly distorted by background noise.

‘Yes, why?’

‘Oh, nothing,’ Turner replied, talking softer now. ‘Just take a look at your frigging restaurant later. Fucking Yanks.’ He hung up.

‘What does he mean?’ Beesely asked Johno.

‘They hit the cliffs with rockets. Restaurant will have rocks in it that fell a few hundred feet. Guess they were under it at the time.’

‘Hell, it can be fixed - it’s only glass. No matter.’ Beesely waved dismissively as his satellite phone came to life. ‘Yes?’

‘This is Apache leader, safe to move around now.’

‘Thank you. Check the mountains and find that damn mortar position, would you.’

‘Roger, we see them on infra red.’

Another dull thud registered, another mortar, then no more for five minutes.

Beesely pressed a button. ‘Get me Minister Blaum.’

‘Beesely? Are you OK?’ came a few seconds later.

‘Yes, fine at the moment.’

‘We have had reports of strange helicopters in your area.’

‘Yes, but we shot them down. They’re in the lake, no evidence left.’

‘In the lake? My God.’

‘I would like you to make a very big effort, Minister, to suppress the news. We will do so as well. If the news gets out ... it will harm us all. We can’t have people believing in large scale terrorist attacks in the heart of Europe, now can we?’

‘I will see what I can do. We have given the British aircraft permission to land at Zug.’

Beesely shot a questioning look at Johnno, but asked the question of Blaum. ‘Who’s landing at Zug?’

‘The British Army. I thought *you* requested them.’

‘I’ll get back to you, Minister.’ Beesely hung up then addressed a manager. ‘Get hold of the airfield at Zug, find out what’s happening.’ He turned to Johnno, a quizzical look. ‘British Army?’

Johnno shrugged his shoulders and made a face.

Beesely’s phone went again, answered with an irate, ‘Yes?’

‘Beesely, it’s Colonel Milward.’

‘Ah Milward, how goes it your end?’

‘We killed three, captured two. Boys are having a word with them right now.’

‘When they are finished I’ll send a plane for them on the QT.’

‘You read my mind. The P.M. does not want this public.’

‘After everything that has happened lately, not bleeding surprising.’

‘Anyway, take a look out the window. No trainers or canoes, or fishing rods - just warm bodies.’ Milward hung up.

‘Gentlemen, some fresh air, I believe.’ Beesely stood and led them outside, despite Johnno’s cautioning against it.

The great hall bustled, crammed with armed guards, its large antique tables now doubling as first aid stations. The courtyard appeared just as crowded, the entrance a blinding shaft of light in contrast to the dark interior. Squinting, they emerged into the warm summer's sun, guards running in all directions. At the drawbridge entrance they halted, flanked by guards.

'Sweep for intruders,' Beesely ordered. 'Set up police road blocks for up to ten miles to pick up stragglers.' He squinted down towards the lake, past holes in the tarmac and grass, and Johnno's wrecked car, then held up a hand against the sun as four RAF C130 Hercules transports descended towards the Zug airfield to the east. 'British?'

'Yep,' Johnno replied, stepping forwards. 'Looks like the Rapid Reaction Force out of Brize Norton.'

Beesely turned around and took Otto by the arm. 'Alert the airfield, have whoever it is directed here, close the roads.'

'Gunna need a new flag,' Johnno pointed out.

Beesely glanced up, the Zug flag now in tatters, caused by shrapnel from the mortar. Otto put his phone to his ear and stepped away, glancing up at the flag. He tapped a guard on a shoulder and pointed at it.

'This ain't over yet,' Johnno suggested, nervously studying the cliff behind the castle.

'Johnno, no matter how well paid they are they can see a dozen Apaches and now four Hercules. And they will have also seen the cannon fodder chopped up. They will sod off, regroup and try again later. And anyone within a five mile radius we will get.'

'Maybe. Anyway, me and Thomas have a chore.' They walked back inside, Beesely watching them go with some concern.

In the lower bunker's access tunnel Johnno grabbed the healthiest looking of the prisoners, just a wound to his arm, which was now bound up. He dragged the man to the middle of the tunnel then kicked him with his good leg. Guards moved back the walking wounded, giving Johnno some space.

‘My young friend here would like to have a word. You see, his young lady was killed by one of yours.’

The man cursed at them in French.

‘Not helping,’ Johno pointed out. He turned to Thomas. ‘Thomas, hands.’ Johno signalled two guards. They lifted the prisoner and held him up. ‘OK, Thomas.’

The boy stepped forwards and started to punch. Thomas’ best efforts were not hurting the man much, but they were helping Thomas. After five minutes he started to cry, Johno leading him away.

2

Beesely and Otto were joined by Herr Mole as the roar of vehicles grew louder. Turner and his men came out carrying their wounded, some limping, but all covered in masonry dust. The two Captains stopped level with Beesely.

‘Well done,’ Beesely congratulated them.

‘What happened to that cushy number Johno promised us?’

‘That comes next. If we don’t have any more visitors!’

Scottish Kev was carried out on a stretcher, bound with white bandages over his drab camouflage fatigues.

‘How are you?’ Beesely asked, taking Kev’s hand.

‘Bit too old for this, Boss.’

‘You’ll be well taken care of. And very well compensated!’

‘Sounds good, Boss.’ They carried him off.

‘And the cavalry is here,’ Beesely shouted after him.

A dozen army jeeps drove up the compound road, six soldiers in each, machine guns mounted at the sides. They pulled up, troopers piling out with their weapons at the ready.

‘Major,’ Captain Turner called with a lazy salute.

The Major acknowledged him with a nod, noting Kev and then the damage to the top of the castle, mortar holes in the tarmac. ‘Been having fun?’

‘You are?’ Beesely firmly asked.

‘Major Phillips. Plus forty odd troopers of assorted shapes and sizes. But unfortunately, our jeeps are still in desert pink.’

‘You missed the action by a few hours. Your boys here did an excellent job holding the castle.’

‘I’m sure I’ll hear all about it. Where would you like us?’

‘Sort your wounded, then split into teams. Two of my guys with four or so of yours, search this area for any more snipers, booby-traps or insurgents before dark. Then hunker down and wait for trouble.’

‘Who’re the insurgents?’ the Major puzzled.

‘Mercenaries,’ Beesely explained. ‘Yanks, French, one Brit I believe.’

Phillips eyebrows shot up. ‘What the hell are they doing attacking a fucking Swiss hotel retreat?’

‘They came for me. They were paid a lot of money by a Russian billionaire.’

‘Pissed in his pool?’

‘He’s the idiot behind the dirty bombs. And the guy who killed some of your lot this morning.’

Phillips’ features hardened. ‘Then let’s hope he sends some more our way.’

Three buses eased up the camp road, tooting their horns for people to get out of the way as the drone of helicopters grew louder. They pulled up near the drawbridge.

‘They are our agents,’ Otto stated. ‘Collected from other areas.’ They both walked forwards.

Beesely raised a hand, stopping them from disembarking their buses. To the first man, now stood on the buses lower step, he said, ‘Stay on the buses, go around to the side of the mountain, spread out. We need the mountain cleared before it gets dark, then we want patrols set up.’ The man nodded to the driver and they quickly moved off in convoy.

The echo of automatic gunfire in the distance caught their attention. Beesely turned to Major Phillips. ‘Major! Stragglers! Let’s not get complacent just yet.’

The Major dispatched his men as Beesely turned to Otto. ‘Get us some searchlights, from anywhere. Beg, borrow, buy or steal them.’

Otto raised his phone.

‘Herr Mole,’ Beesely called, Mole limping over. ‘Get onto the Internet and contact every mercenary company you can

find, every private security agency that might know people who were here today. Send them a message: a hundred mercenaries killed in Switzerland, no survivors.'

Mole bowed his head, turned and limped off.

Beesely glanced at his watch as Otto stepped closer. 'At dusk I want every vehicle we have ... fuelled, parked here and lights on full - shining in the eyes of any night-sight watching us.'

* * *

On the hilltop the Texan observed the scene below with a powerful telescopic sight. He lifted his satellite phone.

'Leaf to Tree.'

'Tree here, go ahead,' came back in a strong Russian accent.

'Leaf to Tree, situation hopeless, targets in place, mercenaries all dead or captured, American Apache attack squadron circling overhead, hundred plus regular British SAS just arrived by plane, maybe five hundred regular K2 agents now swamping the area, more arriving all the time, over.'

'If they do not kill you, I will.' The line went dead.

The Texan stared at the phone. 'Now there's gratitude for ya.' He sat upright and surveyed the scene, taking a deep breath. 'Beam me up, Scotty, for fuck's sake.'

He put a cigarette on his lip and lit it, taking in the scene over the lake.

3

'Beesely!' the Major called across the tarmac in front of the castle. 'Someone just gave themselves up, white flag. Says he wants to deal.'

'Strip him, then bring him to me.'

Johno returned to the front of the castle, now crammed with guards and soldiers. 'What was that?'

Beesely stood with his hands clasped behind his back, looking defiant. 'Maybe a lucky break, a prisoner who wants to make a deal.'

John surveyed the scene. 'Only a fucking madman would try and get in here tonight.' Three K2 helicopters flew past, heading for the mountain. 'Those merc's we fished out the lake were South African. The dead diver... it looked like genuine US Navy Seal kit. Brave man.'

An SAS jeep pulled up five minutes later, a half naked man flung to the ground, rolled painfully on the tarmac then kicked by a few troopers. With a crowd gathering they lifted him up and pushed him forwards, his hands tied. The muscle-bound mercenary did not appear afraid, more resigned to the fact of his failure.

Johno noted the man's scars. 'Been shot a few times.'

'Yeah, a couple,' came back with a Texas drawl.

Beesely folded his arms. 'Speak. Quickly.'

Soldiers cocked weapons. Johno stood to the man's side, close enough to hit him.

'Well, old buddy, it kinda looks like we weren't told of your full strength here,' the prisoner began.

'Obviously,' Beesely retorted. 'Who would attack a place like this ... and in daylight?'

'Yeah, well we weren't expecting much resistance ... and nobody knew about the British SAS either.'

The Apaches came back over the mountain, drowning out any conversation, the prisoner watching them with keen interest. They were closely followed by a flight of eight jets screaming over.

'Johno?' Beesely called.

'American F-18s, Swiss Air Force. Those are in ground attack configuration, 30mm cannons on the wing. Make hell of a mess of anyone resisting up there.' They re-focused on the prisoner.

'You really think you stood a chance?' Beesely snorted. The prisoner shrugged. 'What was your role, some sort of manager? Team leader?'

'Sort of, yeah. I recruited a lot of the guys.'

'For whom, pray tell?'

'I'd like to make deal, old buddy.'

Beesely thrust his face forwards. 'I'd like to let my people peel your skin off.'

The man's confidence waned a little. 'I can give you the people behind it.'

'Like ... Boris Luchenkov?' Beesely toyed.

'He's the money, but not the brains behind this party.'

'You know who helped attack my people in the UK?' Beesely pressed.

'I know the key three players, yeah. But that info' is no good to you if I'm dead.' He straightened. 'Listen, buddy, I wasn't captured, I gave myself up to make a deal because these guys want me dead now. And you want what I know before nightfall, or you're gunna lose more people.'

'Take a look around you. No one will survive an attempt on this place.'

'Maybe not, but they *will* try.'

Johno turned to Beesely. 'He's got a point. More snipers and we lose a few people before we get them.'

Beesely sighed. 'Put some clothes on him and bring him inside.'

Beesely sipped his tea before slowly unwrapping a chocolate. The prisoner sat opposite, glancing up at the guards, Johno stood ready next to him.

'OK,' Beesely finally said. 'If you help us capture the organizers alive, and play a material part in doing so, you walk with money.'

'Sounds like the making of a deal,' the prisoner enthused.

'So, who's at the top of the food chain?'

'Met the fella twice. American, mid sixties, white hair. New Yorker by the sound of him.'

'And his background and skills?'

'Some sort of CIA type, but I have my doubts.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Too well groomed, this fella. More Harvard money type. Perfectly manicured nails, old college tie.'

'What college?'

'Hell, as if I'd know.'

'What did it look like?' Beesely pressed.

‘Yellow-ish, castle in blue, some birds holding something in their mouths.’

Beesely turned to Otto, who stepped out, handing a manager the notes he had taken before returning. ‘Didn’t happen to get this smart gentleman’s name?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Height, weight?’

‘Five eleven, hundred sixty pounds. Prominent mole on cheek. Hell, maybe two.’

‘And you met him where?’

‘Washington always. A marina café, Pentagon.’

Beesely made brief eye contact with Johnno, a signal that he had a suspect in mind. ‘And the other men?’

‘English fella I followed, just in case, after we met in London.’

‘Just in case?’ Beesely repeated.

‘In case I needed some bargaining chips,’ the prisoner said with a sadistic smile.

‘I see. And where did you follow him to?’

‘Small English pub, end of Curzon Street.’

Beesely shot a glance at Johnno.

‘Spook,’ Johnno stated.

‘Any name?’ Beesely nudged.

‘Got his car number. Memorised it, not difficult. Charlie One Romeo Charlie Uniform Five.’ C1RCU5. Otto stepped out.

‘Circus!’ Beesely translated. ‘A slang term for British Intelligence, old school.’

‘If ya say so.’

Beesely eased back. ‘Describe him.’

‘Bald, maybe sixty-five, seventy, a bit tubby. Round face, very round. Red cheeks.’

A manager appeared. ‘That car is registered to an Oscar Thompson, Chigwell, Essex.’

Beesely lowered his head, frowned and pursed his lips. ‘Oscar ... Thompson?’

‘You know him?’ Johnno asked.

‘Long time ago maybe.’ He pressed a button on his phone. ‘Get me Colonel Milward, SAS, at home if necessary.’ Beesely sat back, nibbling his chocolate.

‘Beesely?’ came from the desk phone.

‘Milward?’

‘Yeah, was dozing at home, long day.’

‘Try living in this postcode! Listen, we know the spook who gave the info’ that led to the attack on your boys.’

‘I’m all ears.’

‘Oscar Thompson, Chigwell, retired, fat and bald apparently. Find out who and what he is, then be a love and pick him up.’

‘I’ll get back to you.’ He hung up.

‘OK, person number three,’ Beesely probed.

‘He’s Swiss, or German, hell if I could tell.’ Beesely made eye contact with Otto. The prisoner added, ‘We met in Bern. No names, they knew me, they paid me, so they were calling the shots.’

‘Did you follow this one?’

The man gave a large theatrical smile. ‘I’m a sneaky bastard, if truth be told.’

‘Then tell the truth,’ Beesely quietly insisted.

‘Centre of Bern is a new apartment block, got a café on the ground level, Martina’s, and a shop that does those European bagels.’

Otto raised his phone and spoke quickly for two minutes. ‘We have the address.’

Beesely turned to the prisoner. ‘What else?’

‘Tall fella, bit of stoop, about fifty, sixty. Always wore a smart blue suit with a waistcoat. His apartment is the one whose buzzer is top right on the board.’

Otto spoke quickly with an agent at the other end of the phone. Then they waited. Five minutes passed, Beesely using the toilet and freshening up.

Otto’s phone rang. ‘They have him. Bringing him here.’

‘You know this man?’ Beesely asked.

‘Yes, he was a Swiss Minister, but lost his job because of scandal with young boys.’

‘Did K2 help with the evidence?’ Beesely knowingly asked. Otto answered with a quick nod, Beesely turning back to the prisoner. ‘Can we expect any more company tonight?’

‘Sure can. And I know where, when and how.’

‘If this pans out you walk with one million. At least... you get a head start.’

The man lost his smugness. ‘Head start?’

‘One of the men missing, presumed killed, was a gentleman named Oliver Stanton.’

‘I know that name, heard him mentioned.’

‘Well, what you don’t know is that he was highly placed in the American intelligence community. His associates ... won’t be pleased.’

Concerned, the Texan asked, ‘Can you make a deal for me?’

‘I can make a deal for myself, no one else. If you want to try and deal with them I’ll get you an introduction.’

The Texan forced a smile. ‘Guess I’d better hit the ground running, eh?’

‘So, unless you want us to tie you to a tree out front and leave you there tonight you’d better tell us what to expect.’

With Otto taking notes the prisoner listed those attacks yet to be made. Traps were set.

* * *

Guido Pepi’s drawing room now hosted twelve smartly dressed elderly men sat around a large table, the cardinal sat off to one side against a wall.

Pepi calmly cut the end off a cigar. ‘We are here, brothers, at this unscheduled meeting, to discuss the strange course of events in Zug today. Despite the fact that the Americans have - quite openly - come to the assistance of K2 in recent weeks, we saw today a large-scale attack by ... irregulars and mercenaries, instigated by the Americans. Some French, Americans, South Africans - a mixed bunch.’

‘And that attack failed,’ a German man curtly noted.

Pepi nodded as he lit his cigar. 'Not least because of *direct* military assistance by British and American special forces.' He shook the match and tossed it into an ashtray.

Many of the 'brothers' glanced at each other, exchanging concerned looks.

Pepi waited, taking in their faces before speaking. 'What we can be sure of now, is that the British and Americans are falling over themselves to help K2, and I am certain that is because it is a race to see who gets to the files first.'

Now the assembled men let out their concerns with numerous overlapping comments.

Pepi again waited, taking a long draw on his cigar. 'Any doubts we had ... have gone. They have shown their hand.'

'Then we must plan to get the files first!' a man growled at Pepi.

Pepi raised a hand, silencing the group. 'We can be sure now that any attack on the castle would fail, not least from the assistance *forced upon* K2 ... by the British and Americans.'

Men nodded their reluctant acceptance of that premise.

'We shall have to *increase* our budget for taking action against K2.'

Again the men nodded their reluctant acceptance of that premise.

Five minutes later Pepi stepped down into the basement, a bank of monitors showing his drawing room table and the assembled 'brothers'. Three elderly men in smart suits sat watching the screens, the volume now turned down.

Pepi sat. '*They* ... are fine, behaving as expected. It is the other matter we must be concerned with.'

The first elderly man offered Pepi a grizzled expression. In German he said, 'We introduce Luchenkov to O'Sullivan and play them like puppets, then they get together for this attack on K2 without discussing it with us. Who was playing who?'

Pepi offered a soothing expression. 'It can only work to our benefit, both within the group and with K2. The publicity may well force the Swiss Government to close down K2.'

The three power brokers seemed appeased by that.

One wagged a warning finger. 'Unravel what Luchenkov and O'Sullivan were doing together, besides what we already know. For them to be this secretive it must be something very important.'

* * *

Dusk was coming on as the Swiss prisoner arrived by helicopter, bundled out onto the grass. As per Beesely's instructions all of the dead mercenaries were laid out at the edge of the grass, sixty-seven bodies so far.

The Swiss prisoner had been marched past the bodies before being met by Beesely, Otto and Johnno - plus more soldiers than he had ever wanted to meet, all staring at him.

Beesely gestured towards the corpses: 'Your people.'

Horried, the prisoner took in the long line of blood-soaked sheets and the legs sticking out. He turned back to Beesely.

'You have only one chance of avoiding us keeping you alive for a year and torturing you every day. I want the name of the American.'

'He kill me,' came back in poor English.

'We will keep you alive, in a small room, your hands and feet cut off, your tongue cut out and your testicles set on fire every day.' Beesely put his hands in his pockets.

The man was terrified. 'Henry O'Sullivan.'

Beesely took a sharp breath and looked away, clearly angered.

'You know him, Boss?' Johnno asked.

'You met him at the casino in the Bahamas,' Beesely quietly stated.

'He is Lodge?' Otto asked in a forced whisper. 'The Lodge wants us dead?'

'No, not The Lodge, just him. Probably some internal power struggle.' He tipped his head towards the Swiss prisoner. 'Give him the chair, tape it. Same for the Yank prisoner.'

'Nein!' the man screamed as he was dragged away.

‘We will not release the American?’ Otto asked, concerned at breaking his word.

‘I lied. Burn him.’ Beesely paused, a stern look for Otto. ‘Do you really want that guy walking away?’

Otto lowered his head.

Beesely took a step then halted, spinning around. ‘No, don’t kill him, I have a better idea. Make him watch as the others are given *the chair*, and as they are incinerated, then send him back to America. He’ll talk, say what he saw.’

Otto nodded his acceptance.

The Israeli salesman walked out, decidedly not as cheerful as the first time Beesely had encountered him. ‘I will be go now,’ he said in poor English.

Beesely folded his arms. ‘Why? This is a great place to test your equipment?’ He raised his eyebrows. ‘*We have a lot of problems.*’

‘If I want to make this test I go to Gaza, not so much trouble!’ He glanced from face to face, giving them a disgusted look before walking towards the main gate.

Johno watched him go. ‘We should talk to his boss, request him back.’

‘Johno, don’t be cruel.’

4

Beesely’s phone chirped as he stood in the courtyard. ‘Yes?’

‘British Prime Minister, sir.’

‘Put him through.’

‘Sir Morris?’

‘Yes, Prime Minister. How are you?’

‘I was about to ask you that question.’

‘Still alive and going strong is the answer.’

‘And what can you tell me about what happened today?’

‘The short version is this. Our good friend the Russian billionaire, who wants to be President - nay dictator - of Russia, paid for those dirty bombs. He had some help or collusion from the Iranians, which is still a work in progress.

‘Having stopped the bombs we became a target. He paid a lot of money and got himself some good help. A Swiss

Minister with a grudge, someone from British Intelligence and then made contact with an influential American who used the opportunity for a bit of ladder climbing and score settling. They hired a hundred of the best mercenaries they could find and sent them my way.

‘Fortunately we are a tough nut to crack, and your SAS boys sent many of them straight to hell. That’s the short version.’

‘The British man is a bit of a disappointment.’

‘For that much money, Prime Minister, many people would have turned.’

‘You’ll be glad to know that I spoke with the President a little while ago and he called the Russian President. I believe that Boris fellow was captured or wounded in a shoot-out, his assets seized.’

‘Good, may be an end to it. Thanks for your boys today.’

‘Least we could do for *you*. Let’s talk at length tomorrow, sounds as if you have a lot on your plate. Night.’

Beesely walked back inside. At his desk he asked for The Lodge. Johno and Otto slumped, Thomas wanting to see more shooting.

‘Beesely, David here, how goes the good fight?’

‘To quote a phrase from our colonial cousins, we kicked ass!’

‘I hear the British Army landed in force?’

‘Enough to invade some small countries. Listen, you sound as if you’re on speakerphone. Who is with you?’

‘Full assembly here, given what’s happening.’

‘Good. Then this will save time. Henry O’Sullivan ... killed Oliver. And ... he was behind today’s attack on K2. He took Russian money.’ He waited, listening, some words being exchanged in the background.

‘Beesely, do you have the evidence?’ David asked.

‘Yes, and key witnesses being tortured as we speak. I don’t suppose you’d like to hand Henry over to me, would you?’

‘We’ve got to go now.’ They hung up.

‘Guess they want a word with him in private,’ Beesely muttered.

‘Yeah, me too,’ Johno added. He stood. ‘We done?’

‘I think we ticked all the boxes. Now, if you don’t mind, I need to collapse in this chair before I collapse out there. Johnno, Otto, clean up outside. Thomas, go to bed. Otto, wake me in an hour, please.’

With the room emptying Beesely called back Johnno.

‘Yeah?’ Johnno curtly asked.

‘Any ... observations, on today’s activities?’ Beesely coyly posed.

Johnno gave it some thought. ‘They kept the hot tea coming. Gotta be grateful for that.’

‘Indeed,’ Beesely quipped.

‘Gimme a hot cuppa and I could solve all the worlds’ problems.’ He sat on the edge of the desk and waited.

Beesely began, ‘We just took part in the largest terrorist - and counter-terrorist - operation since, well, Munich probably. Right here in picture-postcard quiet old Switzerland, right at the heart of Europe.’

‘Keenly assisted by the British and American governments,’ Johnno pointed out.

‘Does it not give you a warm fuzzy feeling, to know that you’re at the centre of things?’

‘Like the fucking Alamo centre of things, yeah.’

Beesely slowly nodded. ‘If I did not know better then I’d say that we were ... important to the outside world.’

‘Us two? Hah! We’re not worth two bent pennies.’

‘So, in that case...’ He paused for dramatic effect.

‘K2 is important to the outside world. Very ... fucking important.’

‘And us two? We ... are steering the ship.’

Johnno headed for the door. ‘The Mayflower, or the fucking Titanic,’ he posed as he stepped out.

‘Titanic, I think,’ Beesely muttered, heaving a heavy sigh. He eased the chair backwards, but held his gaze on the door. ‘*Better to live the life of a king for a day, than that of a peasant for a lifetime.*’ He checked his watch. ‘Is my day up yet, God?’

Snoring and gunfire

1

Otto walked around the companionway and to the top of the stairs. 'All managers,' he quietly called before sitting on the top step, an unusually casual gesture for him. Johno leant on a railing with Thomas. The managers assembled quickly, all looking surprisingly neat, clean and fresh.

'First, I want all available agents to assemble here. I want our builders in the morning, our decorators and cleaners. Check them all very carefully.

'Newspapers and TV. We must contain everything. Families of those killed or wounded must be spoken to and compensated immediately.

'Prisoners. Ship them to the mountain camp, all dead bodies to be finger printed, photographed and blood samples taken. I want twenty handed over to the Swiss Authorities, use all the dead Americans and some of their equipment. Then incinerate the rest without any trace.

'Weapons. Try and trace weapons back to the dealers, keep the weapons for now.

'Tonight. All vehicles shine their lights, all search lights we can get. I want a patrol roster set up, the mountain and area must be checked, every inch.

'No one goes home, so please telephone your families. After ten o'clock tonight, four hour sleep in rotation. Do not disturb Herr Beesely, if he sleeps all night that is OK, please be quiet here. Now, this is the story I want to tell the press, a copy to Herr Blaum.'

Johno straightened, concerned. This was not what Beesely had asked for, or agreed to.

Otto continued, 'Today, a well-funded gang of international criminals, which included many American mercenaries, attacked a facility owned by the International Bank of Zurich, falsely believing that the bank's gold deposits were stored there. That attack lasted some six hours in total, near a facility in Zug, and included helicopters and dozens of

armed men. Many members of staff were taken prisoner and the Swiss authorities allowed in a large contingent of British SAS counter-terrorism and hostage rescue teams to supplement Swiss police.

‘The attackers were all killed in a gun-battle with the SAS, but Swiss authorities are searching the area of Zug for some persons who escaped. The gang was funded by Russian billionaire Boris Luchenzov, who was behind the burglary attempt.’

Johno slowly formed a wry smile and nodded. Otto stood and tipped his head towards the exit, so that Johno and Thomas would follow. They descended to the dungeon, where Otto poured out three beers.

‘Here,’ he said to Thomas. ‘Try and drink quickly, in one go.’

Thomas tried, getting half way through. Johno accepted a beer and they sat on the sofa.

Otto commented, whilst gazing at Thomas, ‘I think he will not sleep without some drink.’

Johno agreed, encouraging Thomas by a hand under the boy’s glass. ‘Been quite a day,’ he let out with a sigh.

‘For sure.’

Thomas burped and laughed.

Johno faced Otto. ‘It was a good story to put out, solves a lot of problems with the press. Also makes the mercenaries look like criminals ... *and* the merc’ agencies they worked for.’

Otto sipped his drink. ‘There will be a great deal of resentment from the Swiss towards these men. And in Europe.’

‘Best call your woman. Your fiancé.’

‘And what do I tell her?’ Otto asked, his eyelids heavy.

‘The truth, save it slipping out later.’

‘There are many things about K2 she does not know.’

Johno studied his half-brother. ‘Problem then. She’s about to marry someone who tortures and kills people for a living. Same problem for troopers, but their wives soon get bored of the war stories and just want better sex.’

Otto laughed, spilling his beer. 'I hope she does not want better sex, she is very demanding now.'

'Need to be careful, mate. Sex kittens can turn into lazy old cats.'

Otto lowered his head and gazed into his drink. 'Right now I would settle for a lazy old cat and a small house where no one knows where we are.'

Johno sighed. 'Nah, no you don't, you like the buzz as much as the short-arse here. He kept asking to see dead bodies.'

Otto glanced at Thomas as the boy tried to improve upon his last burp. 'At that age, they do.' He lifted his beer. 'Prost!'

'Prost!' Johno repeated, Thomas copying.

An hour later Johno put Thomas to bed. He put an exhausted Otto to bed in a guest room before returning to the control room. With a cushion on the floor he stretched out in front of Beesely's office door, pistol under the pillow, curiously observed by the command centre staff.

2

The Texan was already blindfolded as he was dragged into the chair room, roughly dumped into a chair and tied to it, the blindfold finally removed. His nostrils filled with the pungent odour of dead bodies, burning flesh and human waste. Opposite him sat the Ukraine technician, naked and sobbing, his pale old body a pathetic image as he sat tied to his chair.

Hungry and thirsty, and trying hard not to breath through his nose, the Texan took in the room; large TV set, video or DVD player of some sort, guards stood near the door, a body lying in the corner. Then he noticed it; a wheeled metal trolley with surgical instruments on it. He swallowed.

The door opened and in walked a strange little man with a plastic apron. With a pronounced limp the very short man hobbled towards him; bald, thick lens glasses, shirt and tie under the apron.

'You've got to be shitting me,' the Texan muttered.

'Are you comfortable?' Herr Mole asked him.

'Just what the hell are you supposed to be?'

‘I am the torturer,’ Mole informed him.

‘Torturer?’ the Texan repeated, his eyes widening.

‘It is a dying profession,’ Mole pointed out.

The Texan smiled. ‘Beesely sent you to screw with me, right?’

Mole lifted a blowlamp, turned on the gas and ignited it, its bright flame illuminating the darkened room and throwing shadows up the walls. He took a step closer and torched the Texan’s knee for two seconds, burning the polyester tracksuit bottoms he was now in. The man winced in agony, but controlled it. ‘Perhaps you think you are dreaming?’

‘I made a deal with Beesely!’ the man forced out, gasping.

‘And you will not be killed. You are here to watch.’

‘Watch ... what?’ he gasped.

‘The others getting *the chair*. But if I notice you closing your eyes or turning away you will be burnt.’

Mole limped towards the technician. ‘You, my friend, released radioactive ball bearings to terrorists, causing the death of a friend of mine.’

Mole turned his head to the Texan. ‘He is old, so his heart will probably give out after six or seven hours.’

Wide-eyed, the Texan stared.

Mole continued, ‘After him, there are eleven of your men to follow. You, my friend, will watch them all die... all the men you recruited. Then we will send you home. Unfortunately for you, my friend, I have made sure that the Internet chat rooms are blaming you for the deaths of the American mercenaries, claiming you sold out. Now, please watch carefully.’

3

An hour before dawn Johnno wandered outside, Beesely still asleep. He acknowledged the SAS commander, Major Phillips, in front of the castle as the officer stepped down from a jeep, the Major’s face now painted with green and brown streaks.

‘Mister Johnno VC, Congressional Medal of Honor.’

‘Please, just call me VC-CMH.’ They laughed. ‘Been up the hill having fun?’ He lit up, offering one to the Major.

‘Been up the hill all night. Found a bunch of stragglers regrouping and trying to evade the roadblocks, held up in a farm. Had to *persuade* them to come out.’

‘And?’

‘Five prisoners, three dead, some wounded. Three of your guys were injured in a fire-fight before we got there. I don’t think there’s anyone left up there, at least not alive and moving around. Must be five hundred people up there right now.’

‘We do have resources. Kev OK?’

‘Dunno. In one of your hospitals, I guess.’

‘In which case, being pampered silly. They bring in hookers and masseurs if you want them.’

The Major straightened, raising his eyebrows. ‘Might just have to trip over a man-hole cover.’

Johnno smiled. ‘C’mon, tea and a sandwich.’ He led the Major inside.

‘We’ve been ordered out at twelve noon,’ the Major mentioned.

Johnno snapped his head around, surprised, then let his shoulders drop. ‘Ah, well. We probably got it covered.’

‘The original two squads coming back with us as well.’

‘Something we said?’

‘Politics.’

Johnno feigned hurt. ‘No need to swear.’ They laughed as they walked on.

In the staff canteen the Major sipped his tea. ‘Listen, Johnno, I’ve been doing some scouting around here and some thinking.’ Johnno frowned slightly. The Major continued, ‘Unlike your good self I’m an experienced officer, experienced in men and equipment logistics. What went on yesterday makes no sense to me *at all*. Granted, there may be things going in this spooky place that I don’t know, but something seriously don’t add up.’

‘You noticed that as well.’

‘Let’s take what we know. Russian billionaire offers up a load of dosh to kill you lot and destroy this place. No matter how good your boys here are, or how much of a tough nut to crack these bunkers are, with that kind of money he could do it. No ... problem. So why are you still alive?’

Johno shrugged slightly.

Phillips continued, 'These mercenaries got into Switzerland without you noticing, yet I understand no one takes a dump around here without your say so ... so a puzzle. They use great, great expertise and planning to get here. It would have taken a few days for a lot of these boys to get into place without getting noticed ... *and* a shit load of cash. That dirty bomb was stopped in London what, five days ago now? Nowhere near enough time to arrange this attack. I'd take two to three weeks minimum to get it sorted.'

Johno stirred his tea, heaping in another three sugars.

Phillips added, 'So the plan was already in place. Did you upset someone earlier?'

'We weren't *here* earlier,' Johno quietly stated, looking up. 'But the previous owner was a real asshole who upset a lot of people, so someone may have made a plan to attack him back then. And he was an old Nazi fucker.'

'Johno, this attack - and the mercs' used - has CIA written all over it. Who else can you think of who would put something like this together? Russians, Israelis? No, this is Bay of Pigs all over.'

Johno stared ahead, out of focus. 'And for these mercs' to attack in daylight? Downright stupid. Suicide against *us*.'

'Then they were not briefed on you. Each group probably thought they were the only ones, up against some poofy Swiss bank with a few ageing guards with pistols.'

'It's the only way any of this lot would attack. But who, and what, we are is not widely advertised.'

'With a big budget they could have found out,' Phillips insisted.

'It had me confused all day.'

'What you've got here is this. Very expensive, well oiled plan, ready made to get these people into place, then rank stupidity by attacking in daylight. At best this whole thing was a giant distraction.'

Johno straightened and stretched his aching back. 'Yeah, but from what? The only other thing that happened was that a high ranking Yank spook got killed, or kidnapped, day before yesterday.'

‘Really?’ The Major considered how that may have affected things. ‘And if you lot hadn’t been distracted, you could have found him ... or the kidnappers?’

‘We certainly would have had a better chance at it. But like you said, with that much money they could have got this guy anyway, so why such an elaborate distraction, drawing in a lot of attention and publicity?’

‘It’s going to take some thinking, but there’s something else going on around here.’

Johno lifted his eyebrows. ‘Trust me, there’s always something else going on around here.’

* * *

‘Did you kick me in the night?’ Johno asked as he entered Beesely’s office. Otto sat hunched, sipping coffee and looking fatigued.

‘No, I tripped over you, idiot, when I went for a pee.’

‘First time, second or third?’ Johno asked as he tested the temperature of a tea on the desk.

‘Second time actually, the first time your snoring woke me.’

‘I think one of the managers put me on my side.’

‘I think I phoned them!’

Johno laughed. ‘Seen the news?’

‘Yes, bloody good idea of *his*, ties up a lot of loose ends in one go, makes them all look like criminals, lots of praise for the Brits.’

‘Some awkward news in the States,’ Johno pointed out. ‘Bit of guilt, their mercenaries attacking Switzerland. All Yank tourists cancelling their flights here.’

‘I can imagine.’

His desk phone came to life. ‘Sir?’

‘Yes.’

‘Call from a David at The Lodge.’

‘OK.’ Beesely glanced at his watch. ‘Late night his time, about 2am.’

‘Beesely?’

‘Yes. How goes it, David?’

‘Not so good, we’ll be feeling the fall-out from this for a long time. Especially with the Swiss practically blaming us for the attack on you.’

‘Er, David, the team leaders were Yanks, so were a lot of the mercenaries. If you are feeling some heat ... so you bloody well should be, they were your bleeding boys!’

‘And we will have to try and deal with that –’

‘And so will I. I will track back to the agencies that sent some of these boys and have a word.’

‘Well ... we’d appreciate some time to do our own research first.’

‘Fair enough. Where’s Henry?’

‘Suffered a heart attack last night.’

‘Tragic, I’ll send a card. You chairman now?’ Beesely asked.

‘For the moment, full vote in fourteen days.’

‘You’ll have my support.’

‘And *you*’ll have my support and vote.’

Beesely paused. ‘What do you mean, exactly?’

‘Around fifty five percent of top table members are mentioning your name. Everyone loves the hero of the moment.’

Beesely straightened. ‘How very odd. Nice to know I’m popular, but thanks and no thanks. Chairmanship requires continuity, and I’m too old. Whoever gets that seat needs to be in it for ten years, and I would like you to make that point on my behalf at the next meeting. Besides, there has never been a Brit’ occupying that seat. Would be awkward.’

‘Always doing the right thing –’

‘You’re next in line, David, so take it. Just remember what happened to Olly and clean house.’

‘Will do. Do you need anything?’

‘You can save me some time, effort and resources by tracking down any Americans who failed to realise who they were up against.’

‘That’s already in progress. Seems that the chat in the Internet forums for these guys is nothing but that. Don’t expect anyone from this side of the pond to bother you for a while.’

‘Good to know. Let’s talk in a day or so.’ Beesely hung up.

Otto leant forwards. 'You have given up ... the chance to be chairman ... of The Lodge? My God!'

'Can't stand American politics. Besides, lots to do here - need to keep an eye on you two! Right, any more trouble?'

'Nope,' Johno offered. 'And the SAS - all of them - leaving at noon.'

Beesely considered it. 'Organize some gifts then recruit a fresh team or two. I want them here yesterday.' He clapped his hands together. 'C'mon laddy, chop chop.'

Johno stood and walked out of the office. 'Like my bleeding father,' he muttered.

'So,' Beesely began, turning to a bleary-eyed Otto. 'Got a wedding to plan. Pink tuxedos?'

'Fuck off.'

They laughed.

'Yacht?'

'No fucking yacht!'

Beesely raised his hands. 'Can we at least agree that we can throw Johno into the nearest lake?'

'Yes. It is traditional for you English types.'

Family

1

As Johno set-off to locate the remaining SAS 'old dogs', now re-labelled the 'walking wounded', he was called to by a guard - who informed him that a Mr. Grey from The Lodge was at the main gate. He ordered them to allow him in, but under escort. Grey arrived a few minutes later.

'What *you* doing here?' Johno demanded, hands on hips, the visitor now flanked by six guards.

'I was sent to try and find Oliver Stanton,' Mr. Grey calmly stated.

'And?'

He paused. 'No sign of him, or a body.'

'Professional hit, body won't ever be found,' Johno coldly stated, Mr. Grey looking tired and dejected. 'What you after from us?'

'Assistance in finding the body. This is your turf.'

Johno studied Grey's worn features for a moment. 'I'm sure Beesely will do what he can. You hanging around Switzerland?'

'Yeah, for a while. Hoping to catch up with whoever killed Mr. Stanton.'

Beesely walked out, squinting against the bright sunshine and shielding his eyes with a hand. 'Heard we had a visitor.'

'Sorry to trouble you, sir,' Mr. Grey formally offered. 'I heard you are nominated for chairman.'

'And rejected. My place is here.' He glanced at Johno, then back to Mr. Grey. 'Why are you here, exactly?'

'I was Mr. Stanton's personal agent for fifteen years, sir. He was like a father to me.' Johno glanced at Beesely, who lowered his head. 'I'd like to find the men behind this, then take his body home. I ... lived with his family for a long time.'

Beesely took a breath, glancing at his shoes. 'To hold the position of personal agent to the chairman for fifteen years you would have to be very good.'

'That's correct, sir.'

Beesely straightened. 'Well, if they are happy enough, and you are happy enough, we could find some use for a good man.'

Grey's eyes widened. 'I'll discuss that with them. Thank you, sir. This does seem to be where the action is.'

Beesely held up a warning hand. 'If you say we have a lot of problems you will be shot where you stand.'

Grey suppressed a smile. 'A lot of ... opportunities, for men like me and Johnno.'

Beesely nodded. 'Yes, unfortunately. And in the meantime, Johnno here will help you turn this country upside down trying to find Olly's body.'

'That's very good of you, sir.'

'You look as rough as us. How long since you slept?' Beesely probed.

'Washington, three days ago.'

'Johnno, feed this man and get him a room at the Spa. Kick back for a day or two, Mr. Grey, you don't want to be out and about in Switzerland with an American accent just now.'

Grey smiled. 'Yes, sir.'

2

'Problem?' Beesely asked an hour later, noticing Johnno's expression as he entered his office, doughnut box in hand.

'I'd avoid the builders and decorators for a while, I just showed them the restaurant.'

'Not happy?' Beesely asked, easing back.

Johnno gave him a pained expression. 'The head-man decorator sat down and started crying.'

'Oh dear,' Beesely said, a look of mock concern.

'Seems that after the last attack he and his gang worked sixteen hour shifts, trying to impress us with their dedication.' Beesely shook his head. Johnno continued, 'Poor old guy nearly worked himself to death. Was due to go on holiday today with his family. Apparently their lad is studying in London.'

'What's his name?'

Johnno shrugged. 'Fuck knows.'

Beesely pressed a button on his phone. 'I want the head decorator who worked on the restaurant to be sent home, then his family taken to England in one of the Learjets. Give him a ten thousand euro cash bonus, then find a replacement.'

'Oh ... er ... yes, sir,' came a female voice.

Beesely glanced at Johnno, but spoke towards the desk phone. 'You don't sound sure.'

'May I go with him, sir?'

Beesely and Johnno exchanged questioning looks.

'Go with him?' Beesely repeated.

'He's my father, sir.'

'Come to my office.' They stood, Johnno shrugging his shoulders at Beesely.

The telephonist, aged twenty-five, knocked and walked straight in with a beaming smile.

'The decorator, he's your father?' Beesely enquired.

'Steffan? Yes, sir. We were going to visit my brother in London. That's where I studied languages, sir.'

'Why on Earth are you here today then, young lady?'

'With all the problems yesterday, sir, all staff were recalled.'

Beesely stepped closer. 'Young lady, take your father to London. Now go.'

She quickly closed the gap, hugged him and kissed him on the cheek, then ran out. Beesely tried to hide a huge smile as he sat back down.

'I didn't get a peck on the cheek,' Johnno complained, but she had gone.

'Well, perhaps you should spend less time skidding your car into guards.'

Johnno slumped into a seat. 'Don't want to take all the fun out of being here. Seen the way they get off the road when they know I'm coming in?' He stuffed another doughnut into his mouth.

Beesely put on his glasses and glanced at Johnno over the rims. 'You use your techniques, I'll use mine.'

They both looked up as a casually dressed woman entered. She was in her late forties, had shortly-cropped dark hair with

a few grey flecks, and an authoritative air about her. She stood heavily built, but not overweight.

She carefully studied Beesely, then noted Johnno and his shoulder holster, as well as the MP5 lying on the desk. Otto appeared in the doorway and stood level with her, but she did not react to Otto, suggesting that she already knew him. Beesely turned his gaze to Otto, a question in his look.

‘This is Detective Susan Hayes, Metropolitan Police,’ Otto informed them.

‘We not paid some parking tickets?’ Johnno quipped.

Beesely’s brow creased. ‘The Met?’

Otto took a big breath. ‘Apologies for not mentioning this before, I wanted it to be a surprise. And this lady’s appearance here today was ... overlooked with everything that happened yesterday.’ He took a breath and straightened, running a hand down his tie. ‘Detective Hayes, this is Sir Morris Beesely - your father.’

Beesely slowly stood, his jaw dropping.

Johnno jumped up. ‘Christ, what a day to arrive!’ He wiped his hand hurriedly on his jacket then put out his hand and shook. ‘This will be awkward,’ he said with a pained expression.

Beesely walked around the desk and approached her, studying her carefully. A moment passed. ‘I have no idea where to start,’ he softly admitted. ‘How ... how much do you know?’

‘My husband’s in Special Branch ... and your name has been bouncing around for weeks. It’s been quite surreal. Mister Otto contacted me almost eight weeks ago - without giving away your name - left me his number. But it was only a week ago that I agreed to come and meet you. Thought it was a joke at first.’ She coughed out a nervous laugh. ‘Always thought my real dad was the kind of arsehole that ran off and just left my mum to cope.’

Johnno lowered his head and gave Beesely a quick glance from under his eyebrows. ‘There’s a lot of it about,’ he muttered.

She glanced from one face to the next. ‘Then just as he -’ she thumbed at Otto. ‘- told me your name, all hell breaks

loose and you're rumoured to be right at the centre of it all. My own damn biological father.'

She turned to Johnno. 'And you - *face fungus* - you're the one, aren't you?'

Johnno raised a flat hand. 'That girl was over sixteen.'

She stepped closer. 'I have a sixteen-year-old daughter, so that's not so funny.' She studied his forehead. 'You got those stitches crashing a helicopter in Blackheath.'

Johnno sat back down. 'Vicious rumours. Shouldn't believe everything you hear, love.'

'So the rumours of a Victoria Cross were untrue then?'

'Must be,' Johnno answered, looking uncomfortable.

'I live in Woolwich. Along with two cats, a goldfish, three dogs and three teenage daughters.'

'Ouch!' Johnno said. 'Food bill must be six foot long.'

She forced a quick smile. 'It is.' She added, 'That food bill would have been a lot shorter if that bomb had gone off.'

Embarrassed, Johnno turned away.

Otto tipped his head forwards. 'Perhaps now would be a good time for the rest of the bad news.'

She turned. 'Sorry?'

'He ... is your half-brother.'

She snapped her head back around to Johnno, who waved and forced a smile. 'Oh. So you work together, father and son? Strange.'

Johnno smiled, genuinely. 'You have no idea. You see the smartly dressed guy next to you? Gunna need to stick him on your Christmas card list as well.'

She frowned at Otto.

'I am also your half-brother.'

She raised her eyebrows as far as they would go, then turned to Beesely. 'Well ... after twenty years in the Met I thought I had seen it all. But this is very, very strange.'

Thomas walked in with an MP5 slung around his chest. Johnno made eye contact and shooed him quickly away.

It was too late, she noticed. 'That kid had an MP5?'

'He's part of the family,' Beesely unhappily reported as he sat back down. 'Everything else around is strange, so why not *him!*'

His phoned buzzed. 'Sir, the American Ambassador.'

He pressed a button. 'Not now, please.' He lifted his gaze to Susan. 'Would you like some tea?'

'Something a bit stronger would help,' she suggested.

Beesely shot Otto a glance, who popped out and then quickly returned. Susan sat as a drinks tray was brought in. She grabbed a whisky miniature and downed it in one.

Johno tipped his eyebrows. 'Woman after my own heart.'

'So,' she said, pouring herself another whisky. 'Those people outside?'

Johno answered, 'SAS rapid action squad - we had some unwelcome visitors yesterday. This is one of those postcodes, you know, when you ask for car insurance and you give the postcode, then the girl on the phone laughs and doubles the quote.'

'I thought Switzerland was very quiet and peaceful?'

'It was ... until *they* came here,' Otto mentioned. Johno laughed, stopping when she focused on him.

She reached into her jacket and produced three small photographs, placing them on the desk in front of Beesely without comment. He picked them up and studied each one carefully. 'You don't remember her, do you?' It was asked without any hint of malice.

'No, my dear, I'm afraid I don't. Is Hayes your maiden name?'

'No, it's Hodge.'

Beesely made eye contact and apologetically shook his head.

'She was a secretary in MI5, 1962. Died of cancer more than ten years ago. Still, she lived to see at least one grand kid. She married a year after I was born. *He* died a few years back. Was a good father.'

'I'm afraid I never was,' Beesely quietly stated.

'Given what you do, that's hardly surprising.'

'No, my work is no excuse,' he admitted to himself. 'Others managed it.'

'And many managed to do a *really* bad job of it, too!'

He regarded her coolly. 'Just sitting there puts you in danger. Being my daughter puts you in much more.'

‘Hence the small army outside.’ Beesely and Johnno exchanged uneasy looks. She continued, ‘I’ve been in the Met’ for twenty years. Been shot, been stabbed, lost colleagues, attended way too many funerals, put scumbags away and then arrested them again a year later.

‘You know, I have enough years *in* to retire and take the pension. And I was left a good amount of money when my ... parents died. I don’t need to do what I do. But you know why I do it?’ Her features hardened. ‘Because every morning I say goodbye to my three girls I wonder if they will be safe that day. What stands between them and harm’s way ... is me.’

‘Well said,’ Beesely commended.

‘I understand ... that you are a very wealthy man,’ she commented before taking another sip. ‘And yet here you sit, bruised face, machine gun on the desk. You could be sat relaxing on a beach.’ She waited, glancing at Johnno.

Beesely sighed, taking a sip of his drink and easing back in his chair. ‘If *we* were not in harm’s way, then somebody else would be - someone less capable. Better the bad guys bump into us first. We ... push back.’ He took a sip of his drink. ‘It was an odd twist of fate that led to us intercepting those dirty bombs. And if we hadn’t *stretched* a few laws and rules—’

‘My family would have been right on the front line, scrambling to get out of London with the rest.’ She took a gulp. ‘I’m not mad at you, although I was a few weeks ago. The father that raised me was a good man. Hell, I only found out when I was twenty.

‘The last few weeks have caused mixed emotions. Sometimes I was curious, sometimes angry.’ She studied her glass. ‘But hey, most of my friends and colleagues are from broken families, most have created their own broken families easily enough, the Force does that in good measure.’

‘Is there ... anything you need?’ Beesely tentatively asked.

‘New washing machine,’ she joked. ‘No, seriously, we’re well off compared to most.’ She straightened. ‘I wasn’t sure who you were, or whether or not the rumours were true, but I sat down with some colleagues and we broke a few rules of our own.’

She produced a two-page crumpled document from a pocket and handed it to Beesely. 'Shopping list.'

He puzzled over it. 'There's just a list of names and addresses?'

'Not that kind of shopping list. Those are people who got off on technicalities, or people we can't get the right evidence on.' She sat upright and faced him squarely. 'If you want to be a good father, forget the washing machine and have a go at that lot.' Without taking his gaze off her he handed the list to Otto, who stood and walked out. She watched him go. 'Something I said?'

Sternly, he stated, 'You, young lady, are a bit of a tough nut.'

'I like her,' Johnno offered.

Otto re-entered and sat, picking up his drink.

'So, was that a yes or a no?' she asked. 'My shopping list?'

'We'll research the people on the list, then see what we can do,' Beesely stated.

'Can't ask for more than that.' She saluted him with her glass. 'Husband is dying to meet you.'

'You will have to be very careful, my dear, I have a lot of enemies.'

'Let them show their faces and I'll bite their fucking noses off!'

Beesely's jaw dropped.

'See,' Johnno began. 'She's a Beesely alright.'

She stood. 'Rest of the gang are up the road in a posh hotel, thanks to Mister Otto. We're here for the week, so stick your head in when you're ready, show us around. And don't feel bad about spoiling us *at all*. If you're giving it, we're fucking taking it.'

Beesely stood open-mouthed as she stepped out.

Johnno laughed, topping up his drink. 'So, Otto, any more of his offspring out there?'

'Not that I could find, she was the last.'

'Probably a few more,' Johnno suggested. 'He was active for a lot of years.'

Beesely stared at him, not pleased. 'Johnno, would you like Otto to track down some of yours?'

Johno stopped smiling. 'No, I frigging wouldn't. Me and kids, ha!'

'You're not so bad with Thomas,' Beesely began before remembering the MP5, the swans and ducks, the prisoner beaten. 'I take that back. We should sterilise you.'

Otto laughed.

Johno pointed at him. 'Your turn soon enough.' He wagged a finger.

Otto stopped smiling, took a deep breath and dropped his head. 'It is true, yes.'

'And you'll do an excellent job,' Beesely suggested. 'Of that I have no doubt.'

Otto brightened. 'I have had much to consider in my life, when it concerns family.'

Thomas walked back in, less the MP5, stopping next to Otto.

Otto added, 'And if Thomas wants, he can live with us.' He repeated it in German. Thomas gave it some thought before standing next to Johno.

Beesely raised his eyebrows, clearly surprised, but smiled anyway. 'Otto, concentrate on *your* kid, let Johno struggle with the little monster.'

They laughed - without translating.

Only the SAS go clubbing in Newport

1

Newport Borough Council and the Chief Constable of Gwent were not happy; three-dozen billboards had been pasted with new adverts overnight, on roads leading into the town. On them were pictures of SAS troopers storming into battle, plus a large slogan at the top. 'Only the SAS would go clubbing in Newport!'

Investigations had been made, advertising companies spoken to. Nothing could be found, the 'cat food' advertisers not happy either.

* * *

Two days later Johnno stood outside the new 'hotel', in front of a group of twenty-two ex-soldiers, plus two former spies. His t-shirt said, 'You *do* have to be crazy to work here.'

'OK, crazy people,' he began, noting their odd looks. 'Welcome to The Hotel. It's not a funny farm, nor a psych' hospital or any of that bollocks. You are all guests at my little hotel here.' He limped forwards, two K2 guards stood close with MP5s.

'Who did you say you were?' a man asked.

'Johnno. Ex-SAS, head of security for a charming organization called K2, which is paying for all this. And, if you fucked-up old heroes sort yourselves out, your potential future employer.'

'And what does this ... K2, do exactly?' a man asked.

Johnno smiled, stood with hands on hips. 'Industrial espionage, security, casino security, counter-terrorism advice and support, hostage rescue, bugging, stealing, torture and murder. *Any ... questions?*'

The men glanced at each other.

'OK,' Johnno continued. 'Some rules. You each have a nice room. You will each be provided with clothes. You will all have unlimited food and alcohol, no cost. There are TVs with

satellite tele' in each room, a small cinema, reading room, games room, a gym and a pool. And, for those who may wish to partake, you are each granted one hooker a day.'

'Did you say ... *hooker*?'

'First things first. Each of you will have five grand in cash, help with opening a UK bank account if necessary.'

'Why you giving *us* all this stuff?' a man enquired.

'Good question,' Johnno answered, pointing directly at the man. 'Answer is not so easy. Here, gentlemen, is the short version. I was SAS, then MI6, got shot the fuck up, had some help from some good people. Month ago I came into a large amount of money, so now I'm going to give you crazy fuckers the kind of help I got. And if you respond well to treatment there's a job waiting for you with us.'

Twenty gorgeous 'ladies' walked around the corner, the malnourished and dishevelled men turning and staring.

'OK, this is the drill. Every one of you has a quick shower, two beers and good shag. Condoms please! Then we have some nice food for you, some more beer and another shag. Tomorrow morning we start with a medical and some gentle exercise, more shagging and more booze. And, well, that's the routine ... basically.'

Many of the men stood with their mouths open.

Johnno pointed toward the entrance. 'If you please, gentlemen. Showers!'

Men started to walk inside, a little bewildered. One walked up to Johnno.

'You were in the Falklands with me,' the man suggested. He had piercing black eyes in a thin face.

Johnno shook his hand. 'What Regiment?'

'I was bomb disposal.'

'An officer?' Johnno asked, glancing up and down the pathetic man.

The former officer nodded. Quietly he stated, 'Hit the bottle. Lost it.'

'Got news for you ... you just found *it*. Guess you'd better stay off the booze, but help yourself to the ladies and the rest of the goodies. See if we can't build you back up.' Johnno

patted the man on the shoulder, registering just how thin he felt under his clothes as he led him inside.

* * *

Pepi lifted up as the white-haired German stepped out onto the veranda.

The German took in the view, hands clasped behind his back and hunched forwards. 'I was seventeen years old when I passed through here first. I remember being elated at the sight of Rome.'

'It has not changed much,' Pepi suggested, also now stood at the veranda's ornate railings.

'Here? No, not much – farmland does not change so much. Cities change, although a large part of Rome is just the same, dirty and grubby in the summer.'

'You are the same age as Beesely,' Pepi noted.

The German turned, his head lowered, a slight frown. 'Yah.' He made eye contact. 'He fought in the war?'

Pepi nodded. 'Operation Market Garden –'

'Ah, Netherlands. A stupid, desperate campaign.' He looked back out over the olive groves and distant vineyards as Pepi waited. 'So, what of our people inside K2?'

'No mention of the list, or the treasure.'

'Is it possible ... they do not know?'

'There are no excavations at the castle. None.'

'It is very strange. I am beginning to think they manoeuvred into K2 for its other values, not what is hidden.' He turned his head to Pepi. 'Try and arrange the escape of Luchenkov. Now that he has the blame, we can use him again without worry. And he will be ... grateful.'

'That will not be easy, not from Russia.'

The German faced Pepi squarely. 'We do not appear to be in a hurry. So, be thorough.'

* * *

An hour later Johnno sat on the lawn with two ‘inmates’, as he described them. All now sat on deckchairs, enjoying the weather with beers in hands.

His two drinking buddies were curiously called ‘Big Dave’ and ‘Big Mac’. Dave was, indeed, tall and heavily built. ‘Big Mac’ was named after the burger, for the fact that his surname was McAvoy. Both men were in their early forties.

‘What happened after you left the Army?’ Johnno asked Dave.

Dave took a sip. His hair remained wet from his shower, and he admitted that the sexual exercise had lasted less than two minutes. ‘I was married, early on. Married quarters, UK and Germany. We divorced about a year before I got out, fuck all money in the bank – maybe less than three grand.

‘I did some of the courses Army Admin’ offered, ‘How to adjust’, resettle – all that bollocks.’ He studied his beer. ‘Got the usual pittance towards looking for work, a few stamps and notes on how to apply for a fucking job.

‘Brother had a small building and decorating business, so I went to work for him. Not much, but got me started, got a little bed-sit in Bristol. He got divorced and she fleeced him – had to sell the business. He lost it ... hit the bottle, so I went off to work as a security guard, twelve hour shifts at night looking at the fucking wall. I used to love it when some fucker tried to break in, gave me something to do. All the other lads there were ex-service, boss didn’t like employing illegal immigrants.

‘They let me go, so I went to work for the competition, same site, different bosses. But these fuckers were knee deep in illegals, so they got raided, fined, shut down.

‘Scraped around after that, did a long distance delivery job. Then just got right ... *fucked-off* with the whole thing.

‘One day I came out the pub and two guys were hitting a little guy, so I tried to break it up. Got arrested, did six months. After that they stuck me in a hostel full of wankers trying to kill themselves ... or the staff. Ended up on the street one summer ... and that was that.’

‘Where did Doc’ Manning find you?’ Johnno asked.

Dave stared into his beer. 'London Bridge, stoned on cider.'

'Wipe the fucking slate clean,' Johnno firmly told him. 'You got a second chance here ... and we'll appreciate you and look after you if you do right by us.'

Dave glanced up from under his eyebrows. 'Just waiting to wake up. All too good to be true.'

'Not all good,' Johnno informed him. 'If you come to work for us you'll be in the front line.'

'Got no problem with that,' Dave suggested. 'I have, according to your psychiatrist, *anger to work out*.'

Johnno laughed, causing Dave to look up. 'Me too. You should see my old Army file – two foot thick! When I first came over here the Swiss boys just didn't know what to make of me. These guys get to work at 7.15am, on the dot, or they're taken out and shot. Shoes shined, ties straight, 'yes sir, no sir'. I was a bit of a shock for them.

'First day here I was supposed to meet the quacks at 7.15am. Turned up four hours late and hung over. Poor fuckers nearly died of a heart attack. Then they did my medical.'

Johnno lifted his shirt, causing the men to wince. 'They don't employ anyone here if they have anything wrong with them. I ticked twenty out of thirty boxes on the first page. I've had malaria twice, plus a long list of tropical diseases. I've had time in hospital for snake bite, poisonous spiders, all sorts of shit.'

'How did you get this job?' Mac asked.

'After the SAS I worked for MI6, unofficially, for ten years odd. Beesely was my sponsor in AGN Security, gave the government deniability - as they say. Also meant that no fucker came for me if I got caught. I did get caught, in Kosovo, shot the fuck-up. But Beesely sent a rescue, fetched me out. Been his bodyguard and driver ever since.

'He paid for my rehab'. If he hadn't I'd be in some NHS psych' ward shitting through a tube, my arse being wiped by some giant African nurse.'

'You seem ... OK?' Mac delicately ventured.

'Had some good help,' Johnno said, suddenly saddened. He took a breath and raised his head proudly. 'And so will you!'

‘He’s worth a lot, Mister Beesely?’ Dave asked.

‘Billions!’ Johnno emphasised, a wry smile forming.

‘Billions?’ Dave repeated. ‘Shit...’

‘How was the bird?’ Johnno asked Dave with a broad smile.

‘Quick,’ Dave said, tipping his eyebrows.

Johnno laughed. ‘How long since the last time?’

‘About four years,’ Dave admitted.

Johnno eased his head towards Mac, a question in his expression.

‘About the same,’ came back. ‘Always been pretty crap with women. Used a lot of prostitutes in the Army.’

Johnno raised an eyebrow. ‘Most of the time I just get the old todger out, keep the clothes on. Most hookers probably got strong stomachs, but I don’t show ‘em my cute little body.’

‘Is all your body ... like that?’ Dave delicately enquired.

‘No. Some bits are worse!’ Johnno said with smile. ‘Where I was shot I lost body tissue and some muscle, so big dents.’

‘Can’t the plastic surgeons do –’

‘Me and scalpels don’t get on,’ Johnno cut in, suddenly serious. ‘I have a thing about scalpels. You won’t see me heading to the doctors unless I’m fucking dying.’

‘Dunno which of us is in worse shape,’ Dave commented, a glance at Mac.

‘That’s easy,’ Johnno answered. ‘I am. So get yourselves fixed up, then you can help me shoot up some fuckers who deserve it.’

* * *

Otto walked into Beesely’s office three days later. Johnno sat sprawled across two chairs, feet up, tea-mug in hand, his Simpsons mug retrieved from the old house. His t-shirt read ‘True success is measured in how many women you *really* piss off!’

Beesely put down his pen and lifted his gaze. ‘How did we do on the stock markets?’

Otto took a breath. ‘Try, if you will, to image the scale of what happened, and that it all appears as if it was *your* doing.’ He read the detail off the paper. ‘The bank society took your

advice, more so than I would have figured for them, and over three days made themselves collectively an estimated two hundred million euros.'

Johnno asked, 'Did they send a little 'thank you' card? You know, those little cards that are like Christmas cards, I really like those.'

Beesely faced Johnno. 'Shut up.' Johnno sipped his tea.

Otto continued, 'Our bank group made four hundred million pounds across Europe, but mostly in the UK. Profits are currently tied up in stock, of course.'

Johnno smiled widely. 'Sweet!'

Otto added, 'Your personal wealth increased by two hundred million pounds, more than Gunter made in ... in ten years. Also, your American friends sent you fifty million dollars.'

Johnno stood. 'Right, I'm going shopping for a new car. In fact, I may buy one every week.'

Beesely eased up and stepped around to them. He put his hand on Johnno's shoulder. 'Johnno, you know what ... I think you should buy yourself a new car. In fact, I think you should buy one every week.'

'Good idea, Boss.' Johnno bounded out.

Beesely turned to Otto, placing a hand on his shoulder. 'Transfer one hundred million into a hidden account for Johnno, to be accessed upon my death. Put that American money into an account for yourself, straight away - wedding present.' Otto stiffened, mildly stunned. 'Spread the money around, set up safety protocols and hide it well, handle the tax. Some day we may need to fall back on that money.'

'Don't bank it in Switzerland,' he said with a glint in his eye. 'Oh, and transfer two hundred million direct from my personal account to the new rescue force in England, I want that pushed along *very* quickly.'

Beesely led him out to the control room walkway. 'May I have your attention please,' he called.

The control room fell silent. 'Ladies and gentlemen, all managers will be receiving a one hundred thousand euro bonus.' They stood in stunned silence. 'All Grade Two managers and senior admin' staff will be receiving thirty

thousand euros.’ Modest cheering began. ‘All junior grade staff and agents will get between five and ten thousand euros each.’ Otto made a careful note.

Beesely noticed Herr Mole. ‘Herr Mole!’

Mole walked forwards until he stood directly below Beesely and Otto. ‘If you please,’ Beesely gestured towards his office.

Mole limped slowly up the stairs as Beesely sat down, knocking and entering a moment later. Otto sat with notepad and paper ready.

‘Take a seat,’ Beesely said, gesturing to a chair. ‘You will be receiving a two hundred thousand euro bonus.’ Otto made a note.

‘Thank you, sir. I will be buying a house for myself and Herr Ricky’s *former* partner. I look to her as the sister I never had.’

‘It’s good that you are looking after her,’ Beesely quietly stated. ‘Family is important.’ Mole bowed his agreement with that statement. ‘Now, we have a job for you, if you are up to it.’

‘Sir?’

‘We are promoting you to full manager, but without a departmental remit. Instead, we want you to work as an *auditor*. Do you know this word?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘You will scan all files and reports, all projects, looking for problems, errors, omissions and potential future problems. Understand?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Is it work that you think that you can do well?’

‘Yes, I believe so.’

‘And work that you would enjoy?’

Mole nodded. ‘I believe so.’

‘Good. You will answer directly to Otto when he is here, if not then the senior admin’ manager, Claus.’ Mole nodded again as Beesely stood. ‘Right, grab a pad and paper and come with us.’

The three of them walked outside, to the grass in front of the castle.

Beesely stopped, turning and studying the castle. 'Right. In light of recent events we are going to tighten up security a bit. I want proposals on extra levels of security, assuming that our enemies will be more capable in the future - if indeed that is possible. I want cameras everywhere, including on the hills around here, up to ten miles away. If a helicopter or a plane is flying down a valley towards us I want to know about it.

'Put an outpost on the top of that cliff, permanently manned with telescopes, fifty calibre sniper rifles, machine guns. If something approaches this facility I want to know about it and be able to shoot it down or destroy it.

'Same for the lake. If a boat approaches, we know about it. And let's make our perimeter ten miles out. Make sure as many of our staff as possible live in houses nearby, and that they have cameras mounted on their houses in strategic positions.

'Day and night we want an SAS trained and led team, maybe four to eight men, on permanent standby and armed to the teeth, ready to deal with any problems. And I want all managers and admin' staff to be weapons trained, also trained in advanced first aid, combat field first aid and unarmed combat.

'In the lower bunker I want seven days of food and water, the blast doors checked and improved if necessary. We need to be able to withstand a two thousand pound bomb, a 'bunker buster', just like the Americans used in the Gulf Wars. Extra stores are to be kept inside, first aid, advanced medical equipment, always a doctor.

'OK, new agents. We want penetration into all of the former Soviet states, but particularly the old Soviet Union. We want the border police of Poland, Hungary, etc, in our pockets and sewn up. Herr Mole, you will temporarily head up the new Soviet section until we recruit a suitable manager.'

He turned, put his hands in his pockets and looked out across the lake. 'Enough to be going on with, gentlemen?'

'A great deal,' Otto commented.

'It is a challenge,' Herr Mole stated.

'Go to work, gentlemen. Go to work.'

Otto's phone rang. 'Here? Now?' He stopped and turned, tipping his head to one side. 'The Society is here.'

'It's daylight?' Beesely questioned.

Otto shrugged. 'They are coming up the road.'

They turned and walked slowly towards the castle, carefully observing the east camp road. A convoy of five silver Mercedes pulled up, drivers jumping out and opening doors for the passengers, the first being The Society leader himself. The rest Beesely did not recognise from their last meeting.

'The restaurant finished?' Beesely whispered.

'Not one hundred percent, but OK,' Otto replied as they walked forwards.

'Welcome,' Beesely offered the head man.

The Society leader noticed Beesely's bruises with a grimace. 'Are you the good health? OK the visitors?' he asked, slowly and heavily accented.

'Yes, fine, fine, you're always welcome.'

The man took in the damage to the castle, the scaffolding and builders as the other members drew level, many carrying boxes. They were clearly not the full society, just twelve, and not the twenty-two Beesely had noted on their first encounter.

'Please.' Beesely gestured inside then limped slowly in, more of a pronounced limp all of a sudden, as Otto noticed.

In the restaurant Beesely set about ordering drinks and food. 'Not the gourmet buffet I promised, I'm afraid.'

'It's not the concern,' their leader said as he sat on the new furniture. 'All is made good now?'

'No, be a few weeks, but we are nearly there.'

'And many ... er ... sensing apparatus?' their leader said, pointing at the ceiling.

'Right now this is the most secure facility in the world!' Beesely stated, sitting next to him.

The other members placed down their boxes and pulled up chairs. Several female members of the kitchen staff arrived and hurriedly adjusted aprons and uniform dress.

As Otto sat, the society's leader produced a cheque. 'You helped without asking for the percentage in return. You trusted with us this information, even when you were hurt and on the vehicles to the hospital. We now trust you the more.' He

handed over the cheque; three hundred million Swiss Francs, fifty million pounds.

‘That’s very kind of you,’ Beesely offered as he handed it to Otto. ‘But not necessary. I would not have asked you for anything.’

‘This was ... in meeting ... discussed yesterday,’ the old man began in his hard to follow accent. ‘You are the strange-ed man!’

Beesely laughed. ‘I shall try and take that as a compliment.’

They opened the first box. Inside nestled an ornately carved emerald green box, not much smaller than the box it came in. The lid was lifted and the contents presented for Beesely to review.

The leader pointed at the box’s contents with a shaky hand. ‘These is the very old trout flies, hand made by royal peoples from Switzerland, and Europe.’

‘Excellent,’ Beesely enthused.

The next box offered a similar collection of trout flies. ‘These are for the fishing, the other box is not.’

‘Heavens! Of course,’ Beesely loudly agreed. ‘Would not wish to lose a priceless fly to a trout.’

The next box contained a pair of rare silver goblets, encrusted with gems and some three hundred years old. The final box contained simply a piece of paper.

‘This,’ the old man began, ‘is your hon-her-he membership the society for the life. And, promotion the first deputy.’

‘A promotion?’ Beesely smiled. ‘Already? Excellent. My mum would be so proud.’

They chatted for almost an hour; discussing banking information, some future plans and some problems that could be solved by K2. They handed Beesely a list of suspect employees to be watched from various banks and businesses around Switzerland, reports of a few breaches of security and a list of three people they wanted ‘removed’.

Beesely agreed to help them in every aspect, before making a request of his own, one he knew they would not particularly like. He wanted to part African politicians from

their stolen money, and make sure it was turned over to the Red Cross. They were not joyfully keen, but respected his request. And he made it just that, a request for assistance, not a condition.

Loose ends

1

The door to Dame Helen's home was answered by her husband, Mike. He straightened in surprise. 'Mister Beesely.'

'Mike. May we come in?'

'Uh, please.' He ushered them in whilst still holding a tea towel, Johno taking in the detail of the house – photographs on the wall. He led them into the lounge, to find Tabitha and a friend sat in front of the television, watched over by a professional nanny that Beesely had arranged the day after Dame Helen's accident. In the kitchen stood a professional home help and cook, also provided by K2. Tabitha noticed and recognised the visitors, but very determinedly turned and ignored them all.

Mike ushered them through the lounge into the conservatory. 'Please, sit down ... sorry about the mess.'

Johno and Beesely remained standing.

'How's the help working out?' Beesely asked. 'Need anything?'

'Very good of you to send the help, Sir Morris. Reckon I would have had a hard time of it, Helen's quite the organizer.' He glanced every which way, apart from making eye contact with his visitors.

'Anything you need, Mike?' Beesely repeated.

'Uh ... no, don't think so.'

'How's Helen?' Beesely asked after a moment.

'Much better, the doctors say. No spinal injury, few broken ribs, fracture in the leg – not too bad. They reckon two weeks and she'll be out and back home.'

'And then, Mike, you deserve a good rest at a health Spa somewhere,' Beesely quietly stated. 'It will help with the healing. We'll organize it.'

'I'll ... er ... talk with Helen about it,' Mike said, still avoiding direct eye contact.

'Do you want to know what happened, Mike? And why?' Johno asked.

Now Mike made eye contact. 'What do you mean?'

Johnno coldly stated, 'Her *accident* was no accident, Mike. They meant to ram her off the road.'

Mike sat, his face in his hands. 'They?'

Beesely sat near him, letting out a sigh. 'That radioactive dirty bomb was funded by a Russian billionaire, one Boris Luchukov. When it failed to do its job he ... got mad. All the papers were praising the SAS and MI6, so he spent a large sum of money and hired himself some good help. They rammed the manager of my private security firm off the road - he's paralysed. They killed two SAS troopers and tried to kill a few more. They rammed your dear lady wife off the road, probably because MI6 received most of the credit for stopping that bomb.'

Mike just stared ahead, trying hard to hold it all together. 'Should have been you who got the credit,' he quietly stated.

Beesely could not be sure if Mike had meant that to sound as cold as it did. He regarded the side of Mike's head for a moment. 'They sent more than a hundred mercenaries to us in Switzerland. We killed them all.'

Mike stared at the floor for several seconds.

'Mike,' Johnno firmly called. 'We have the two men who rammed Helen off the road.'

Mike stood, twisting the tea towel absentmindedly. 'They've been arrested?'

'No, Mike, not arrested,' Johnno explained. '*We* have them.' He inched closer. 'I was wondering if you wanted to talk to them?'

'Talk to them?' Mike repeated in a strained whisper, suddenly annoyed. His face darkened. 'I'd like to rip their hearts out!'

'Fine,' Johnno said. 'Get your coat.'

For a moment Mike just stared at him. Then in a daze he grabbed his coat, letting the tea towel drop to the floor.

After a ten minute drive they pulled into a farmhouse, checked at the gate by several guards. Their vehicle made slow progress along a narrow gravel track before parking at the rear

of the small farmhouse, next to a large steel-fabricated barn. They led Mike inside.

The cavernous barn lay empty except for two men sat tied and gagged in the middle. They sat naked, their bodies now white with cold. The base was concrete, the sides of the metal barn purposely built with gaps; this building offered no warmth or shelter for its two unwilling guests.

Willis appeared at his side. 'Hello, Mike,' he said, no warmth or joy in his voice.

Mike stared at him for several seconds, before turning back to the two men. 'They did it?'

Willis glanced at the two prisoners. 'Yes, Mike. They rammed Helen off the road ... and killed Sophie.'

The last two words struck deeply, Mike recoiling as if struck. Johnno gestured him towards the two men, Mike seemingly reluctant to hurry in that small journey. He stepped very, very slowly towards them.

When close enough Johnno stamped down hard on the foot of one man, causing the man to groan through his gag. 'Mike, there are no witnesses here. And these wankers will disappear afterwards.' The men struggled against their restraints.

Mike stared down at the two men, starting to cry.

2

Dame Helen woke and turned her head, her eyes half closed.

'OK, darling?' Mike softly enquired.

She smiled as best she could, one side of her face a mass of purple bruises and stitches. Reaching for his hand she touched bandages. Squinting hard, she raised his hands to where she could get a better look. 'What happened?' she coughed out, the words painful to form.

Mike studied his hands. 'I did a terrible thing.'

She frowned as best she could. 'What, Mike?'

'Beesely caught the men who rammed you off the road. Had them tied to chairs in a barn ... few miles from the house.'

'What did you do?' she forced out.

'I hit them,' he finally answered. 'I hit them until I had no strength left in me.'

She looked away. After a moment she turned her head back. 'It's what our psychologists call ... definitive resolution of pent up anger or fear. It's recommended as a means of curing people of chronic fear, or curing agents after they've been shot up.' She coughed with the strain of talking. 'Did it work?'

Mike looked up with a puzzled frown. 'Work?'

'Do you feel less of a victim, Mike?' she quietly asked.

He reluctantly nodded. 'A lot better. And ashamed of it.'

'Don't be. Beesely knows what he did, it was no simple revenge.' She coughed. 'He wanted to help you so that you can help me - help *us* move on. May seem barbaric, but it should help with closure.'

A moment passed. 'Will you be going back to work?' he asked, avoiding eye contact.

'Do you want me ... to go back to work?'

'Yes,' was not the answer that she had expected.

'Why?' she puzzled.

'I had a long chat with Mister Beesely. Very wise old man, made me see things clearly. You're very good at what you do, and there's a chance that some other idiot will try and attack London. If you're at your desk you might just stop them, some other family won't have to go through this.'

She stared at the ceiling. 'Well, I'm not giving him back the ten million he gave me to retire on!'

'Ten million?' Mike whispered, checking over his shoulder.

'A week from now he's moving us to a health Spa in Switzerland. Sort it with work, if you can.'

'Screw work ... about time I went self-employed.'

She eased her head towards him, surprised by many things now. 'You've been saying that for twenty years.'

'Life is short. This is not a dress rehearsal, got to make a go of it.'

She raised an eyebrow. 'You *are* changing.'

'Only have one regret,' he softly admitted, glancing at the door.

'What?' she asked, concerned.

He made strong eye contact. 'That I didn't kill them both.'

She rested her head on the pillow, turned away and then back. 'Don't worry, what Beesely will do to them is nothing compared to the injuries I have here.'

His eyes widened. 'You're telling me. That guy with the funny moustache, Johnny something, he ripped their ears off with his bare hands. I think *that one* needs anger-management lessons.'

* * *

At Membury services on the M4 motorway, Beesely took a call, leading Johno out of the shop. They stood beside their Range Rover, guards nearby, Johno holding a large yellow packet of Fruit Pastels.

'Max is dead,' Beesely flatly informed him.

Johno lit up, neither surprised nor shocked. 'Complications?'

'No. I ... arranged his passing.'

Johno straightened, a slight furrow of his brow. 'You what?'

Beesely glanced at the closed Little Chef restaurant across the car park, putting his hands in his pockets. 'He was paralysed, no hope of ever getting off a ventilator. His boy called me, held the phone to Max's mouth.' He turned back to Johno. 'He didn't want to hang around. He pleaded with me to...'

Johno nodded, taking a drag. 'Makes sense.'

'I'd do the same for you,' Beesely stated, no hint of emotion in his voice.

'Should hope so. Not that keen about being here now, let alone paralysed.'

'You seem better than a few months ago. I've seen some real progress in your attitude towards life.'

Johno screwed up his face then shrugged. 'Feel a bit different.'

'Any regrets? Anywhere else you'd rather be?'

'No regrets,' Johno firmly stated. He took a drag, taking a reflective view of the car park 'Would be nice if Jane and

Ricky could be here to see things ... but I'm quite happy to be right in the thick of it.'

Beesely offered him a warm smile. 'Good lad. Fight the good fight, eh?'

Johno cocked an eyebrow. 'Got the frigging scars and medals to prove it!'

'C'mon, let's go home.' They clambered into the car.

'Strange,' Johno began. 'But Zug feels like home now.'

'I know. I hardly think of the old place.'

'See, all you need to feel at home in a place is to be nearly killed a few times,' Johno suggested.

'I'll mention that to Wimpy homes. Might catch on.'

3

A week later Beesely and Johno sat on comfortable chairs on the grass in front of the castle. Managers were assembled nearby along with many other staff members, some with their families, something of a *family day out* feel to things.

Otto walked down with Minister Blaum, past the buffet tables and to the spare seats next to Beesely. Noticing Blaum, Johno hid the helicopter manual he had been reading.

'Ah, Minister, just in time,' Beesely said without getting up. 'Please, have a seat.'

'So,' Minister Blaum began, 'where are the new helicopters?' He accepted a cold drink from a guard.

'Should be here any minute,' Beesely informed him, making a sly glance toward Otto.

'What's that on the lake?' Blaum asked, pointing.

'On the lake?' Beesely pretended not to have noticed. 'Oh, that. I believe it is a target ... for the helicopter pilots to line up on ... as they fly in.'

Johno let out a sarcastic laugh.

Otto tipped his head forwards, 'I would suggest, Minister, that you drink your beer very quickly.'

Blaum became suspicious. 'Target?'

'Here they come,' Beesely announced, sipping his beer. 'Oh, and Minister, I would like to remind you that it was *you* who signed the document allowing us these helicopters.'

Blaum turned, frowning. 'Which will be ... under the control of the Army, these ... *second-hand* American Hueys?'

'Oh, yes, of course,' Beesely agreed.

Blaum was now worried as the drone of helicopters grew louder. In the distance he could see them coming into view across the lake, indistinct blobs on the horizon.

'Ten seconds to heart attack,' Johno muttered, loud enough for Blaum to hear.

The helicopters drew closer. Blaum squinted, making out ten or so in the distance. The sun was behind them, making their outlines hard to discern. The drone grew, reverberating off the nearby hills as Blaum glanced from face to face. All seemed relaxed and happy, sipping their drinks. He held a hand up against the sun, squinting. Then his face dropped.

The first Apache fired a missile towards the target. It exploded with an almighty bang that echoed around the valley. Blaum shot upright in his chair as two more Apaches fired, hitting the target with loud bangs.

People cheered, kids clapped and jumped up and down. Photos were snapped, video rolled, the guards pointing and discussing the relative merits of the helicopter's firepower and speed. The assault helicopters started to strafe the water, large lines of spray rising up as thousands of rounds tore up the water.

'And don't forget, Minister, that *you* signed for these... *second-hand* Hueys,' Beesely calmly stated.

Blaum peered between the gaps in his fingers, his hands covering his face as Johno laughed. The Apaches banked east and flew up the lake in a line astern, a deafening crescendo of overlapping droning resonating off the hills.

Then a missile shot out from behind where they sat, snaking out across the lake with a tail of white smoke and exploding next to the target.

Blaum jumped up and spun around to find a man stood with the missile's shoulder-launcher, now enveloped in smoke. He pointed at the man. 'I did not sign for those!'

'Well, almost true,' Beesely stated as he stood. 'They are listed on the page of spares and extras, which is part of the document you signed.' Blaum glared at an amused Otto.

Johno laughed. ‘Could be worse, mate, you could be related to us.’

Otto glanced over his shoulder as a convoy of two Range Rovers pulled up. He turned to Johno. ‘I think you have a visitor, Johno.’

Johno sipped his beer. ‘What?’ Otto tipped his head towards the road. Johno frowned his lack of understanding then glanced up at the road as a curvy American glamour model stepped down from a Range Rover, her escorts smiling widely. ‘Oh, shit ... I forgot all about her!’

Beesely smiled, slapping Johno on the back.

Otto said, ‘If you think that funny, guess where Thomas is?’

Beesely faced Otto, before turning and followed the line of Apaches, his smile slipping. ‘He’s not?’

‘Who do you think fired that first missile, a few seconds early?’

Beesely shook his head. ‘If I didn’t know better I’d swear that bloody kid was mine. Maybe we should have a blood test, just in case.’

Donations: if you are following the series, and enjoying them, then kindly donate a dollar via PayPal (to gwwresearch@aol.com). It helps to keep the writer writing, to produce more for you to read.

Revenge

K2 Book 3

Geoff Wolak

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Format

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Contact

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This book is dedicated to my young niece ***Hannah***, who asked, and who is banned from reading it for at least ten years after 2007.

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About the series of books

K2 is a series of 6 books. If you have picked up book two, three, four or more - without reading book one - then please put it back down; the story will not make much sense without reading the books in series. They all follow-on closely and previous plots are not re-capped. Later books build on earlier events/characters.

This is a work of fiction, but based on real, current and historic scenarios. All characters are fictitious.

No garden moles were harmed during the writing/research of these books. The author does not advocate firearms as a suitable control of garden pests!

There are many 'facts' deliberately hidden in the book, made light of. 'Many a true word spoken in jest.'

Author's note

'It's largely based in fact. It is written as action-fantasy-fiction, since real life spying is way too boring for a novel.'

Inheritance
Assault
Revenge
Nazi Gold
Endurance
Crucifix

Glossary of abbreviations

P-26/P-27 - Swiss secret sleeper armies
UNA - Swiss Military Intelligence
MI6 - British Intelligence, aka, SIS - Secret Intelligence Service, for overseas operations (non-domestic), aka, 'Circus'.
MI5 - British Intelligence (domestic)
CIA - Central Intelligence Agency, USA, overseas intelligence service
SAS - Special Air Service, British Special Forces (similar to US Green Berets/Delta Force)
SBS - Special Boat Squadron, British, similar to US Navy Seals
DOD - Department of Defense - USA
MOD - Ministry of Defence - UK
NSA - National Security Agency, USA, aka 'No such agency'.
Reported to intercept 'all' the world's text messages and emails.
SOE - Special Operations Executive, British WWII covert operations
OSS - USA, like SOE, WWII, overseas
DGSE - French Secret Service/counter terrorism - domestic and foreign
IRA - Irish Republican Army, terrorist movement
ETA - Spanish/Basque separatist/terrorist movement
Red Brigade - Italian communist/terrorist/crime gang
KGB - Soviet Intelligence, prior to 1990s.
NAAFI - Navy Army Air Force Institute - shops on British military bases.
SIB - British Military Police
BKA - Federal German Police, similar to FBI
FSB - Russian Intelligence, formerly KGB
Special Branch - British Police - anti-terrorism/organized crime
Wehrmacht - general term, German armed services WWII
COBRA - Cabinet Office Briefing Room 'A', used by British Prime Minister for meetings with security staff.
FARC - Colombian guerrillas/communist

British military slang

Oppo - opposite number/close working buddy

Pongo - soldier - derisive

Ponce/poncey - upper class/educated/effeminate - derisive

Regiment - he was 'Regiment' - he was SAS

Rock Apes - RAF Regiment - defensive unit of airfields

Rupert - officer/upper-class - derisive

Beast - punish soldier

Stripy - Air Force Officer, derisive term for ranking stripes

Billets - accommodation/food

Civvy - civilian

Badged - qualified entry to SAS, receipt of cap badge

Best bib and tucker - best suit/outfit/military dinner suit

QT - on the QT, on the quiet

Stag – on guard duty

England. The hunt.

Mr. Grey adjusted the strap on his sniper rifle, wrapping it around his left forearm. He cocked the weapon, a fresh 5.56mm Teflon round in the chamber. Lifting his head he shut his eyes against the bright sunlight, the wind caressing his cheek: east to west, three mph, he estimated. He made a slight adjustment to the rear of the weapon's telescopic sight. This would be a daylight shot, fifty yards, inclined.

The weapon eased into his shoulder as if a third arm returning to the body; it felt natural, it felt part of him. He wiped the palm of his right hand and carefully took charge of the pistol grip, acquiring his target through the telescopic sight. Finger inside trigger guard, finger on trigger, first pressure taken. He focused on the target's home. And waited.

Five minutes passed before any movement was noticed. He adjusted his aim, noting that his quarry was obscured. This would be a tricky shot, so he made his final estimate and adjustment.

More movement.

He fired, a gentle crack through the silencer. He lowered his weapon as a K2 guard ran forwards, trowel in hand. The man started digging furiously, a few seconds later lifting up a dead garden mole. Groans and words of abuse wafted up towards Grey as he sat on Broadlands' chimneystack, looking pleased and holding his camouflaged weapon as if it was a large green cock.

Shiny red tractor

1

Johno handed the busty young blonde, Alison Star, a pair of ear defenders, both now stood in the dungeon firing range. 'Put these on.'

'You're not wearing any!' the Internet glamour model protested. She stood in jeans and a tight, almost see-through top, her hands on her hips.

'I'm used to it, love.'

'I grew up on a farm. I can shoot, as my teddy will prove!'

Johno cocked a teasing eyebrow. 'You shot your teddy?'

'Hit it with a twelve gauge, blew it to bits.'

Johno offered her an amused, quizzical look. 'Why, in particular, did you shoot the teddy?'

'We were shooting a video on the bed, I was all wet, it was there. So I threw it out the window after.'

Johno stared. 'Lucky teddy.'

'Hey!' She slapped his arm, a wry smile breaking across her face.

Johno lifted the MP5. 'This is what I used in the SAS. It's an MP5, 9mm close-quarter weapon. Effective range, fifty yards.'

Alison grabbed it and turned it over, picking up a magazine and clicking it in. 'So this SAS thing, that's like our Delta Force, right?' She cocked the weapon and checked the safety setting, selecting automatic as Johno keenly observed, his mouth opening. As she stepped up to the firing station Johno eased in behind her.

She held the weapon into her shoulder and lined up the sights. 'Johno, you don't need to hold my ass ... or my boobs, for me to shoot straight.'

'Just trying to be helpful.' He stepped back. 'Got to get the right ... stance, you know.'

Alison smiled without him noticing then fired three four-round bursts, tearing a big hole in the middle of the target.

'Oh yeah,' Johno slowly let out. 'Porn babe with an MP5! If the boys in the Regiment could see me now.'

She *made safe* the weapon, resting its stock on her hip. 'I've been shooting since I was four. What else you got?'

'Fifty calibre or rocket launcher?' he asked with a grin.

'Rocket launcher. Never fired one.'

'I should hope not, young lady.' He wagged an accusing finger. 'Bring the MP5, it's a dodgy neighbourhood.' She slung it over a shoulder.

Driving down the west side of the camp Alison noticed a tractor working parallel to them. She was 'trying out' a Range Rover, getting used to the European right hand drive and 'stick-shift', unaware that the Range Rovers were British imports and in Switzerland they drove on the right.

'Oh, look!' she screamed. 'I love tractors!'

She swerved off the tarmac road, bumping across the recently mown grass and right up to the worried tractor driver, Johno's head bouncing off the roof. Guards watched curiously from the West Gate, many with binoculars. Tooting the horn several times convinced the tractor driver to stop. She jumped out, slowly followed by Johno rubbing his head.

'Alison Star?' the old tractor driver asked, heavily accented.

She put her hands on her hips. ‘And how would you know that?’ she playfully demanded.

‘Yeah,’ Johnno sternly repeated, the old man shrugging. ‘How would *you* know that?’

‘I want to have a go on your tractor!’ she told the old driver.

Stunned, the driver said, ‘You want to ride my tractor? It is such an honour. And you with a machine gun as well.’ He stepped down, admiring her form, glared at by Johnno.

Alison jumped up and re-started the shiny red tractor, Johnno clambering up beside her. There was room for two on the seat, just, so he put an arm around her. Jerkily, the tractor pulled away, Alison delighted. She steered it across the grass, going around in circles.

‘You got oil on your top,’ Johnno shouted above the tractor’s engine noise.

‘What?’

‘Your top. Oil!’ He massaged the offending area, adding oil, which had been absent before.

She put her chin on her chest. ‘Oh, hell. You got a t-shirt?’

‘Yeah, other end of the camp.’ He pointed back towards the castle.

‘Here, take the wheel.’

He held the tractor’s steering wheel as they headed across the grass and towards the road. She took the top off and inspected it, then glanced around, a hand across her boobs. ‘Will anyone mind?’

‘No,’ he lied. ‘Switzerland, they invented naturism. You can go almost anywhere here naked, it’s the law.’

‘Really? Europeans are *so* ... cool.’

‘See that lake. All along the edge is nude bathing and swimming,’ he lied. They turned onto the road, Johnno hiding his grin.

‘Herr Otto, there is a naked woman with a machine gun driving a red tractor towards the castle!’

Managers and staff turned, calling up camera images. Otto started to gently head-butt the nearest wall as Thomas sprinted outside. ‘I used to run a secret organization - with discipline, order, dedication, hard work...’

Beesely stood on the castle lawn with Herr Mole and a manger, all now holding clipboards and reviewing security. He ticked another box. ‘Right, lakeside?’

They turned to face a small pillbox sunken into the grass, the manager pointing at another some twenty yards away.

‘They manned?’ Beesely asked.

‘Yes,’ the manager replied. ‘Two men in each, machine guns and a fifty calibre, food and water.’

‘OK, good.’ Beesely ticked another box. ‘Castle?’

Herr Mole answered, slowly and heavily accented, ‘We have the natural advantage ... the original positions for the bow and arrows make for the excellent rifle positions. They were blocked, but some have now been re-opened ... to give a complete arc of fire covering the maximum range.’

‘Good, good.’

Mole continued, ‘The roof door has been strengthened and slots made to fire out from. The new restaurant glass is as before, we cannot strengthen it unless we use steel –’

‘And then lose the view of the lake,’ Beesely cut in. ‘No, no, glass – as before - is fine.’

Mole added, ‘The temporary outpost on the cliff top is ready and manned with four men; machine guns, fifty calibre sniper rifles and 66mm anti-armour weapons. Plus the new surface-to-air missiles. But we fear the journey to the position ... and the outdoor storage ... may be harmful to the function of the missiles.’

‘We’ll review it. They have food and water?’

‘Yes, sir,’ Mole answered. ‘But at the moment they are on twenty-four hour rotation.’

‘Night sights?’

‘Yes,’ Mole answered.

‘Motion sensors?’

Mole explained, ‘We received a batch of one hundred independent motion sensors from the Israelis. They are linked to a central computer and display, which is monitored all day. We have tested it and all seems in order.’

‘Good, good. Lights?’

‘There are now special lights in many places. They are designed to blind anyone using a night sight. They emit light of a special frequency.’

‘Israeli?’

Herr Mole confirmed with a nod.

‘OK. Lake?’

They all turned as Herr Mole pointed, ‘There are now lights under the lake, at the shoreline, and motion sensors with the cameras.’

‘Do they work?’

‘We detected a dead body when it drifted close to shore.’

Beesely’s eyes widened. ‘Really? One of the attackers from the other week?’

‘Yes, sir. We also detect a lot of fish, and one man who fell out of his canoe. It seems, perhaps, too sensitive.’

‘Never mind, better safe than sorry. Right, what about outside the perimeter?’ Beesely asked.

‘We have bought approximately one hundred new cameras for our grid. They have upgraded the grid to cope and now we have a redundant video room with six staff. In the main command centre we can see many kilometres distant.’

‘What about those hills over there?’ Beesely asked, pointing.

‘There are now cameras, but we do not believe they will survive the winter.’

Beesely faced him, a concerned look. ‘Oh? How do we get around that?’

‘Cameras do not work well on exposed mountains. We are looking at alternatives. Also, the motion sensors will be less effective ... when covered in three feet of snow.’

‘Yes, I can imagine. But when there is snow ... it will be easier to see attackers. They’ll leave tracks!’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘OK, let’s concentrate the cameras more on the roads around the mountains, than the mountains themselves.’

The sound of the tractor grew louder. At first Beesely thought someone might be cutting the grass, as they had been in previous days. Then the sound became distinct, obvious now that a tractor approached. They all turned and stepped to the edge of the grass.

The bright red tractor sped along the camp road, from the west and towards them. Standing in a line they silently observed the topless girl with the slung MP5 sitting next to Johnno. The tractor’s seat was spring-loaded and she bounced along, her best assets swaying wildly. She waved politely as they passed, driving past the castle and down towards the camp, bemused guards outside the courtyard stood watching, Thomas grinning and waving.

Beesely, Mole and the manager stood motionless, watching as the strange image moved out of sight. Beesely’s expression was one of resigned indifference, with a hint of disappointment thrown in. He studied his list, then turned Herr Mole’s clipboard towards him. ‘No, I don’t see *mobile armed nudist security detail*. You?’

Herr Mole ran a finger down his list his, studying it for a moment. Then, for the first time in Beesely’s

recollection, the strange little man turned upwards and cracked a smile. 'Mobile nudist security ... ?'

Beesely put a hand on his shoulder. 'Do you need a stiff drink as much as I do?'

'Yes, sir.'

2

In brilliant sunshine Dame Helen stepped slowly and awkwardly across the hospital lawn, Mike hovering ready at her side. Two guards observed from a discreet distance, her nurse holding the Zimmer frame Helen had been practising with. She had been using it for four days, now she felt ready to attempt a few unaided steps.

Unknown to her husband, and the hospital staff, she had woken several times during the night and experimented with a few steps when no one could see her struggle. Now she was making good progress, but hindered by the weight of the cast on her leg.

'Great, darling, great,' Mike quietly encouraged.

Tabitha appeared, spooning out large lumps of melting ice cream from a family-sized tub. Seeing her mother now walking she trotted quickly across and observed.

Dame Helen advanced a further two steps, turned around and stepped slowly back the opposite way. 'The walking is not so difficult,' she commented in a strained whisper. 'Bloody ankle hurts so much. It's the weight of the cast.'

She risked a further two steps and, with the help of Mike, eased down onto a bench. Turning to the nurse she said, 'Can you give us half an hour?'

The nurse placed the Zimmer frame next to the bench, smiled with Swiss politeness and wandered off to attend other duties. Mike sat to one side, Tabitha the other.

'Now that's a view,' Dame Helen enthused.

The three of them looked out over the lake and towards the mountains in the distance. Directly below her room lay an area of neatly mown grass, beyond that a field of yellow flowers leading down to the lakeside, tall pine trees bracketing the view without spoiling it; an image that could have been found adorning any number of calendars.

She put an arm around Tabitha. 'You OK, baby?'

'I'm not a baby!' her daughter quietly protested, finishing her ice cream.

'You'll always be my baby,' Dame Helen softly insisted.

The guards' sudden movement caught their attention, Dame Helen noticing them tapping their earpieces: visitors.

Tabitha jumped up as Detective Susan Hayes' youngest daughter appeared. The girl sprinted towards them, the two girls running across the lawn together a second later.

Susan appeared with her husband, followed by her two eldest daughters. She rudely waved Mike away as she stepped up to Dame Helen. 'Mike, go play,' she firmly told him. Mike gave her as much of a defiant look as he dared, before joining Susan's husband, Patrick. Susan sat and immediately started to intimately check Dame Helen's face, bruises and stitches. 'I spoke with the head quack. We can get the cast off, then a plastic adjustable thing that you can take off or wear in the bath. So you, my girl, have a date with a Jacuzzi.'

'Oh, thank God. This thing is killing my ankle.' She touched the cast, now covered by well-wishers' signatures.

'Right, they said that when the cast is off you can have hydro-therapy and gentle massage of the leg muscle and joints.'

Her two eldest daughters wandered down the grass and sat on a bench, checking their mobiles, little interest in

much else. Two guards brought out trestle tables, followed by hospital staff with plastic trays piled high with food.

‘Good timing,’ Dame Helen pointed out.

‘Christ,’ Susan exclaimed, eyeing the abundant offerings. ‘I’ve put on six pounds since I’ve been here!’

‘Hell, enjoy it.’ Dame Helen waved a hand towards the hills. ‘Go walk up that mountain later.’

Susan declared, counting on her fingers, ‘Today I’ve booked a hydro massage, regular massage, aroma therapy, foot massage and head massage at the same time - whilst eating chocolate and strawberries and cream.’

Dame Helen shook her head, offering a playful scowl.

Susan defiantly added, ‘I’m going to enjoy it while I’m here! And this lot does anything I want.’ She sighed contentedly.

‘They know who your father is,’ Dame Helen quietly reminded her.

‘I know, I’ve never felt like this before. We were in the next town, twenty miles odd, and they have this little train that goes around a mountain - you’ll have to try it - girls wanted a go. But it was stopped, driver’s day off or some holiday. Next thing we know the drivers turn up in a flurry and *we’re* the only ones in the train. Stopped at the top of the mountain, waited as long as we wanted.’

‘Be careful, Susan,’ Dame Helen cautioned. ‘He has enemies. If you knew what happened here a few weeks ago ... half the world’s best assassins came after him.’

‘And he sent them straight to hell,’ she pointed out, tipping her head in a question.

‘I probably shouldn’t tell you this,’ Dame Helen began, reaching across and holding Susan’s hand. ‘But you had a half-sister, Jane. She was murdered a few weeks ago.’

Susan looked out over the lake. ‘Oh.’ After a moment she turned back to Dame Helen. ‘What happened?’

‘Nazi group planted a bomb in the castle, killed her. Beesely went mad, *reputedly* killed around thirty of them, wounded a hundred more.’ Susan’s eyebrows shot up. Dame Helen continued, ‘He caught the man who did it.’ She turned away.

A moment passed. ‘And?’

Without turning Dame Helen answered, ‘Trust me, I have nightmares about what they did to him.’ She faced Susan. ‘Don’t go there.’

Susan nodded as she considered it, Dame Helen lifting her gaze and commenting, ‘Talk of the devil.’

Susan had just helped herself to a plate of strawberries, but now glanced around as Beesely and Johno came into view. Johno shook her husband’s hand, immediately swapping jokes: *How many Susan’s does it take to screw in a light bulb? Fucking light bulb wouldn’t dare go out!*

Beesely walked down to the bench. ‘How are we both today, ladies?’ he buoyantly enquired. He sat next to Dame Helen, half on the bench and facing Susan.

‘Better,’ Dame Helen offered. ‘They’re spoiling us rotten.’

‘Peeing down in the UK,’ he informed them. ‘So make the most of it, ladies.’

‘And no London traffic!’ Susan pointed out.

Beesely made eye contact with her. ‘I hear you’ve been keeping the doctors ... *on their toes?*’ he teased, a look of mock seriousness.

‘You mean, making a complete pain in the ass of myself,’ Susan admitted, wolfing down a large strawberry.

Dame Helen frowned her lack of understanding.

Beesely explained, ‘She’s been pushing your doctors hard. I firmly believe that six weeks of recovery will be effected in just three. They’ve even brought in two American specialists, some sort of experts in rapid recovery.’

Dame Helen scowled at Susan. 'Detective Hayes?'

'What? Ma'am?' She shrugged. 'He's got the money, so sod 'em, they like a challenge.' She swallowed another strawberry. 'Oh, that reminds me, get me a copy of your house key. Day before you get back I'll clean and stock the fridge.'

Dame Helen held Beesely's hand. 'Don't know where you found her, but she's a Godsend.'

'I'm proud of her,' Beesely declared.

Johno and Patrick approached, grabbing food.

Susan gave Johno an unfriendly stare. 'So, Johno, tell me ... found yourself a nice girl yet?'

Johno studied her, not quite sure what she meant, or was implying. Or what she knew. 'I'm saving myself for the right one. Practising, you see. I got the book and video, but just can't seem to get the technique right.'

Beesely scowled at him, Dame Helen giving him a motherly, disappointed look.

Susan added, 'Someone needs to take you in hand!'

'When you're big enough,' Johno countered.

She stood, Johno and her husband taking a step back, equally fearful.

Johno turned to Patrick. 'Was she sweet and nice when you first met her?'

'For about a week!' They retreated in the face of overwhelming force.

'You, Susan, are what he has always needed,' Beesely said with an approving smile.

'He's a big kid,' Susan commented, sitting and watching them go.

Suddenly serious Beesely stated, 'If you read his file you would understand. Get him to take his shirt off sometime.' She frowned her lack of understanding. He added, 'You could not find a patch of skin six inches square without a scar. Just walking through this hospital

makes him tremble. He should be in a glass case in some research facility. Baffles me every time I see him walking around, cheeky smirk on his face. Should have died ten times over.'

They observed Johnno stuffing down strawberries.

'Does he have ... psychological problems?' Susan delicately enquired.

'You would think so, but he has always managed to make me proud. He has a stubborn streak a mile wide, so every time he gets shot or stabbed he gets right back up. I had several evaluations done and they all came to the same conclusion: every time the bad guys knock him down he equates it to his step-dad hitting him and his mother. So his anger kicks in, he gets right back up and fights back.'

Dame Helen said, 'And what he did in London was remarkable.'

Susan turned, a question in her eyes. Dame Helen faced Beesely, an invitation for him to explain.

Beesely quietly informed Susan, 'He was in the helicopter's co-pilot seat, flying the darn thing. But Otto, Thomas and myself ... we were in the back.'

Susan's eyes widened. 'And he rammed that terrorist car? With you in there?'

'Without a second thought,' Beesely proudly reported.

'He could have killed you all!'

'Yes, my dear, and he didn't blink. He has a wonderful set of railway tracks underneath it all. When it comes to the crunch he has a clearly defined sense of right and wrong, good and evil.'

They again observed Johnno as he joked with Patrick.

Beesely added, 'If someone pulled a gun on either of you two he wouldn't hesitate to put himself in front of you. I give him a lot of slack, he's earned it.' His brow furrowed slightly. 'Unfortunately, the car dealerships around here don't know that. They close their doors when

they see him coming and people in the local town get off the streets.'

When Johnno noticed Mike being a little quiet in the background, nervous in his company, he approached him. 'How's ... Tabitha taking it?' he delicately broached.

Mike glanced towards his daughter, seeming unwilling to discuss the matter with Johnno. 'She's in denial according to the doctors, complete denial.'

'That's normal for youngsters.'

Mike shot Johnno a quizzical, sceptical look.

Johnno explained, 'I've had a lot of counselling myself, mate, hundreds of hours, read a hundred fucking books on the subject. Even cats suffer depression after their owners die.'

'Really?' Mike absently enquired.

'Yep. But a new owner and a lot of stroking usually fixes them. Sometimes a change of scenery helps – literally. Time, Mike. She just needs time.'

'Or a complete change of scenery,' Mike muttered, loud enough for Johnno to hear.

Johnno slid his gaze across to Helen, a brief, concerned look.

* * *

At a lakeside café, Luzern, Otto sat down opposite Minister Blaum, a quick glance at the view that was now impressing the tourists – yet old and familiar to him.

'How goes it?' Blaum asked in German.

'Well,' Otto stated, ordering a coffee from a guard stood nearby.

'You could have warned me about the attack helicopters,' Blaum grumbled.

‘I wanted to see the look on your face,’ Otto replied with neutral features.

‘Hmmm,’ Blaum let out with a disapproving look. ‘I swear K2 will give me a heart attack. What’s been happening?’

‘We continue to bolster defences, recruit ex-SAS staff and train our agents. I think, Minister, we are beyond the point where *our enemies* could bother Switzerland through any use of force or stealth.’

Blaum nodded. ‘That is my assessment also. I have had no contact with ... *them* for some time, and I have noticed a fresh attitude towards us around European Ministers.’

‘Good,’ Otto let out as his coffee was placed down.

‘Any mention of *the list* or the treasure?’

‘None,’ Otto came firmly back with. ‘Although, we have been pre-occupied with ... *other* matters.’

Blaum glanced out of the café windows and across the lake. ‘Yes,’ he reflected. ‘Still, it is strange. We know for sure that British Intelligence knows about the list, they had a hand in its theft.’

‘If Beesely does know, he is showing no interest, Minister.’

‘And your *assessment* of them?’

‘They are ... strangely honourable, not interested in financial gains for themselves, more interested in finding and attacking criminals and terrorists. As Johno said the other day – *the game for the game’s sake.*’

Blaum nodded gently as he considered Otto’s words. ‘I must admit I like Herr Beesely far more than I would have imagined. And even Johno.’

Otto tried, and failed, to suppress a grin. ‘He has his own ... charm. And for me, it is odd to be in the presence of someone who will so readily give his life for what he believes in. You know, after the helicopter incident

Beesely offered Johnno ten million pounds and said that he could go his own way.'

'And?' Blaum puzzled.

'He refused, choosing to stay at Beesely's side.'

'That *is* odd. Everything about him would suggest a drunken womaniser -'

'Oh, he's that as well,' Otto confirmed with a cheeky grin.

'And yet he would rather fight ... than retire to a luxury hotel,' Blaum pondered. 'Could he, Johnno, be working for someone ... else?'

'He said something the other day which I am not sure I understood. He said that the danger and the fighting helped him define himself, that he would be terrified to be alone with his own thoughts too long.'

Blaum puzzled it. 'I suppose, if we all sat on a beach for a year, at the end of the day we are left only with ourselves. And if we don't like who we are...?'

Otto tipped his head in agreement as the café now bustled with a coach load of Japanese tourists.

* * *

On their way back to the castle Beesely and Johnno diverted into Zug to pick-up Thomas from football practice. After some pleasantly Swiss, yet determined nagging of Beesely by the boy, the three of them headed to Zug's tourist trap and the pastry shop. Their vehicles were cheekily parked in the local police station's car park, just a short walk down a gentle hill towards the arcade.

People out shopping moved to one side when they recognised the distinctive trio, some stopping and offering polite Swiss head-tips, Beesely offering them all warm greetings in return. In the pastry shop they found only one couple in attendance, both of them K2 employees from a

sub-section near Zug that organised foreign travel, tickets and hotels. It remained one more of the dozens of divisions that Beesely was still getting to grips with.

The shop's owner and staff had grown used to Johnno and Thomas – and the resulting mess, not as nervous as her first meeting with 'infamous' Herr Johnno. The arrival of 'Herr Director', however, was a little nerve-wracking for the staff.

Johnno and Thomas plonked down immediately, Beesely greeting the two ladies and shaking their hands before complimenting them on the display. Asking for a tea he joined the others, four guards sat as far away as the small shop allowed – just beyond arms reach. The Bavarian Napoleon was soon placed down.

'Christ,' Beesely quietly let out. 'If Otto or the company doctor's see this *they'll* have the heart attack they are always warning *me* about.'

Johnno picked up a spoon. 'Fuck e'm, you only live once.'

Beesely tried some of the cake with a teaspoon. Looking up he let out several moans of pleasure.

'It's Johnno's favourite,' Thomas explained, chocolate already around his lips.

Two large offerings of the same cake were placed down for the guards, Beesely turning his head.

'It's my rule,' Johnno cut in when he noticed.

Beesely focused on him. 'Your ... rule?'

'Whenever I'm in a café, bar or restaurant around here – all K2 staff eat for free, off duty or not.'

'Ah, yes, Otto did mention something. Must make you popular, makes up for the driving.'

Thomas laughed, cake now down his front.

Beesely pointed a hooked finger towards the cake. 'Is this the same –'

'Yes,' Johnno cut in. 'In the restaurant.'

‘And our fridge!’ Thomas added.

‘I’m not allowed,’ Beesely sighed.

‘You’re the fucking boss-man, you do what you like,’ Johnno implored, taking a large mouthful.

‘Not that easy, the doctors do the blood work-up every day. Still, they’re amazed at my health as it is. Mustn’t grumble. They’re waiting for the onset of diabetes.’

Johnno held his gaze on Beesely, mildly concerned. ‘That a problem?’

‘No,’ Beesely confidently replied, trying a small piece of cake. ‘At my age it’s practically a certainty. Lots of clever drugs, but if they miss the start-point then lots of nasty side effects ... like swollen feet and blindness.’

‘How *are* your eyes?’ Johnno asked as he cut off a large piece of cake with his spoon.

‘Not bad, considering. But the diabetes will affect that when it kicks in.’

‘How long till it kicks in?’ Johnno asked without looking up.

‘Supposedly, about five years ago.’ They laughed. Beesely glanced at Thomas – and the state of his face – then focused on the guards. ‘If I see anyone with chocolate around their mouths as we drive back ...!’

‘Not a word to Otto or the doctors!’ Johnno threatened with a smile.

Thirty minutes later they were back on the road, another unscheduled stop, a surprise that Thomas wanted to show them. They parked alongside a large red brick house, not looking dissimilar to a school, Johnno noted. The gardens were untended, a very old cat sat on the path; too old, too warm and too not bothered to move. They stepped around it, Thomas giving it one quick stroke.

Thomas did not bother to knock, he just turned a large knob and pushed open the heavy door. Inside immediately

felt much cooler than the midday heat, a polished marble floor and a musty old smell greeting them. On the hall walls hung numerous faded black and white photographs, reminiscent of school groups.

‘Thomas?’ an elderly woman greeted, some surprise in her voice. She straightened when she noticed Beesely. ‘Herr Director?’

‘How do you do?’ Beesely said, offering a hand. They shook.

‘Come, sit, some lemonade,’ the woman said, heavily accented.

‘No!’ Thomas called from out of sight. ‘First I show them!’

The woman smiled to herself then directed the guests into the room that Thomas had ducked into. Beesely and Johnno stepped into a large drawing room, the central feature being a grand piano that Thomas now sat behind.

Thomas waved the adults towards the seats. ‘Sit. Shut up. Listen.’ The adults sat, shut up, and listened as Thomas started his piece, Beethoven, watched admiringly by his tutor. Soon to be followed by admiring glances and appreciative nodding by Johnno and Beesely.

‘He’s good,’ Beesely whispered.

Johnno watched with a pride that would have only been enhanced if the boy had truly been his own. When Thomas finished he got an appreciative clap from the adults. In the garden they sat on wobbly iron chairs that had seen better days, a heavily overgrown and very old garden – but still attractive and restful.

‘How long have you been playing?’ Beesely asked Thomas.

‘Maybe ... five years.’

‘How old was Beethoven when he started?’ Johnno asked the lady.

‘I believe ... five years old.’

‘How often do you come?’ Johno asked Thomas, sipping his homemade lemonade.

‘Twice a week,’ Thomas answered.

‘When you remember,’ the lady scolded.

‘Thomas?’ Beesely called, a frown at the lad.

‘Sometimes things happen at the castle,’ the boy said, his eyes wide and his gaze held firmly on Beesely.

Beesely sighed. ‘That’s true. Sometimes ... *things* do happen at the castle.’

‘Look,’ the lady called. She pointed with a shaky hand up towards a rear window; a bullet hole covered by paper.

Beesely was not pleased. ‘Madam, we will fix any damage like that,’ he firmly indicated, before focusing on Thomas. ‘Make sure they remember to replace the glass,’ he scolded.

Thomas lowered his head and sipped his lemonade.

Johno pointed towards the end of the garden. ‘End of the runway is about five hundred yards that way,’ he explained, a knowing exchange of looks with Beesely.

‘Apologies, madam,’ Beesely offered. ‘We will fix it.’

‘It is not the concern,’ she offered. ‘I worked for Herr Gunter for thirty-five years.’

Beesely and Johno made eye contact.

‘What ... work, did you do for him?’ Beesely delicately enquired.

‘Translator. German, French and Russian.’

‘Could you teach Thomas some Russian?’ Johno asked, the boy lifting his head.

‘Of course,’ came the answer.

‘It’s always useful,’ Johno commented, making eye contact with his young charge, Thomas shrugging.

* * *

Guido Pepi answered his mobile phone, stood now in his vineyard. 'Yes, sir.'

'Report,' came a German voice

Pepi adjusted his sunglasses. 'The head of British Intelligence is convalescing in Zug, and K2 are arming themselves heavily; bunkers, machineguns, not to mention their new attack helicopters.'

'The Swiss are gearing up for a fight, which surprises me. They have sat on their hands for forty years, now they have some guts at last. But these weapons are useless against us, we do not fight guerrilla wars. What else?'

'Talk of a high ranking American going missing in Bern, the day before the attack on K2. This man was, apparently, the superior of late Henry O'Sullivan.'

'Superior ... in what organisation?'

Pepi handled a bunch of grapes, inspecting them. 'That we don't know, but they call themselves The Lodge.'

'Lodge? American freemasons? I am familiar with no such group with any power.'

Pepi put a hand in his pocket. 'So maybe this joint venture between Henry and Luchenkov was for Henry to move up to their Grand Master when this other man disappeared.'

'What has that to do with their attack on K2?'

'We may never know, now that Henry is dead and Luchenkov keeping secrets from us.'

* * *

The local newsagents in the village of Church Fenton were now used to the very polite Swiss gentlemen who popped in most days, usually the first visitors when the shop opened at 7.00am.

Their purchases were typically the same; an assortment of newspapers, several litres of milk, fresh bread plus

many of the second-hand paperbacks that the shop owner sold - thrillers being a favourite. Today Hans was off-duty, he and Henri out for a drive in one of the black Range Rovers, stopping off at the newsagents at 5pm.

‘Good day, Miss Dawson,’ Hans offered, a polite head-tip.

‘You’re late today,’ she idly commented.

‘A day off,’ Hans informed her with a pleasant smile.

The shop door now opened, by a shoulder being rammed into it, the two youths that entered nudging Hans as he fumbled for change.

‘Apologies,’ Hans offered immediately, a reflex action.

‘Fucker,’ the first youth commented, loud enough to hear.

Hans went to pay for the magazine he now held, but found Mrs Dawson focused on the youths, a worried look etched into her face. With his head low he glanced sideways at the youths, the two teenage lads now opening the fridges and grabbing four-packs of cider cans.

‘You over eighteen?’ she pointedly demanded.

‘Don’t fucking hassle *me*, bitch!’ came back, twelve cider cans hastily stacked up on the second youth.

‘Oy!’ she shouted with a pointed finger. ‘Put them back.’ She started moving around the counter.

The youth with the heavy stack of cans stepped towards the door. A quick sidestep from Hans and the youth’s path was blocked.

‘Get out the fucking way, tosser,’ the youth barked.

The door opened and two large, roughly dressed men entered; workman’s clothes, muddy boots, bright yellow safety waistcoats. Hans glanced over his shoulder briefly, turning side on.

‘Da,’ the youth with the cans called, ‘this bastard wants some bother.’ Now the lad’s Irish accent could be

detected. The men stopped, a curled lip and hard glare for Hans, looking him up and down.

‘Oy! Out!’ Mrs Dawson shouted. ‘The lot of you.’

The youth tried to advance past Hans, stopped with a hand on the cans, the reaction from his father instant. The man stepped forwards, closing the gap quickly. With his right hand Hans punched, a hard blow to the chin stopping the man dead. The big man crumpled as his son dropped the cans.

The lowest can split and hissed as the father slipped sideways into the birthday card carousel, half caught by the man behind. The son wasted no time, a right handed punch well aimed for Hans, blocked by Hans with his left forearm as he moved with the direction of the lad’s momentum. A second later the youth’s arm was outstretched past Hans, an elbow to his face breaking his nose and sending him also into the birthday card carousel.

The second man had straightened and now stepped awkwardly over his friend. A sidekick from Hans to the man’s ribs sent him flying backwards and into the shop door. The first youth now had a knife in his hand, a scream issued by Mrs Dawson.

Mr. Dawson appeared from the rear as Hans turned and focused on the knife, taking a step towards the youth. The youth swung the knife towards Mr. Dawson, causing him to jump back and grab his wife. Turning his attention back to Hans the youth was surprised to find a Browning 9mm high-power automatic pistol aimed at his head.

‘Put the knife on the counter,’ Hans calmly suggested, a hand in his pocket, the red button on his phone pressed three times.

The Dawson’s emotions were now mixed; a pistol trumped a knife as far as dangerous weapons go.

The boy stared at the pistol for several seconds, breathing heavily and shifting his weight from either leg.

The look on Hans' face finally convinced him, the lad placing the knife on the counter just before the door was forced open, Henri shouldering the second man out of the way. That man was struggling to get up, a pistol to his temple curtailing his enthusiasm for that idea.

Hans stepped to the youth and holstered his weapon. With the youth distracted, his eyes on the holster, Hans struck straight to the jaw, the youth collapsing backwards into the Rice Crispies.

Hans turned to face the Dawsons. 'Apologies, you will be compensated for any damages here.' He turned to Henri and tipped his head, Henri holstering his pistol and dragging the first man roughly into the street, a good kick to the ribs. The second man followed, Hans dragging the protesting cider youth into the street, finally the first youth was dragged out as the police arrived, closely followed by two black Range Rovers. With the Dawsons now stood just outside of their shop a small crowd was gathering.

The two police officers approached cautiously, one a WPC. The male officer, a well-built forty-year-old, took in the scene and the unconscious forms now on the pavement as the WPC called for an ambulance and more officers.

The look on the Dawsons' faces caused the officers to glance around as six men armed with MP5s approached. Sheer terror was etched into the officer's faces as the senior agent approach, reaching into his pocket.

'Warm day for it,' the agent offered in near perfect English. He handed over his fake ID, that of a Commander in Special Branch.

'Sir?' the male officer called, a heavy frown.

The agent nodded towards Hans and Henri. 'Ours, foreign lads we're training up, Interpol Exchange, usual bollocks.' He surveyed the bodies. 'Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. You know these handsome gentlemen?'

The male officer regarded the laying forms as the WPC started putting them in the recovery position. ‘Gypos by the looks of it. A load of them pulled up on the common last night.’

‘That’ll be good for the ducks,’ the agent offered. ‘Roasted, or deep fried?’

The male officer managed a reluctant smile. ‘Where you based, sir? Round ‘ere?’

‘Not far, and not supposed to say. Old manor house, been converted, covered firing range, few classrooms, access to the Fens.’ He pointed at Hans and Henri and motioned towards their Range Rover, the pair mounting up and heading off.

‘We’re going to need details –’ the officer began.

‘Like fuck you are!’ the agent barked. ‘My boss will call your boss in a while.’ He stepped closer, a threatening look. ‘As far as I’m concerned this lot got into a fight and... knocked each other cold. Rest is up to you. But make no mistake,’ he quietly threatened. ‘This gets into the local rag and you’re going to wake-up to find me at the bottom of your fucking bed!’

The officer blinked, taking a half step back.

The agent added with a pleasant smile, ‘Have a nice day, what’s left of it. And don’t forget to log their ethnic origins!’ He turned, a circular motion of his raised arm, the K2 agents mounting up and heading off.

* * *

Otto approached Beesely on the command centre companionway. ‘A problem in England, at Broadlands.’

‘At the house?’ Beesely questioned.

Otto explained, glancing out over the command staff, ‘A guard was shopping in the local village, the shop they use, which I believe you call a *newsagents* –’

‘The Dawsons?’

Otto turned back to Beesely and nodded. ‘Four men entered, intent on causing trouble for the shop owner. Our agent hurt all four men, the local police arriving.’

‘And?’

‘Our senior agent convinced the local police he was your Special Branch.’

‘Ask Dame Helen –’

‘Already done so, she has made a call.’

Beesely took in the command staff. ‘Was our man at fault?’

‘I do not believe so. A young man drew a knife on the shop owner -’

Beesely snapped his head around. ‘Drew a knife on Mrs Dawson!’ Beesely was outraged. ‘Who were these men?’

‘I believe they are what you call ... travellers and gypsies.’

‘In Church Fenton?’ Beesely asked in a forceful whisper.

‘Encamped on the village green apparently.’

Beesely wagged a finger. ‘I want them removed ... any which way,’ he growled.

Back to work

1

‘Seen this?’ Johno asked as he ambled into Beesely’s office an hour later.

Beesely lifted his head, peering at Johno over the rim of his glasses. ‘Hmmm?’

Johno sat, opening The Sun newspaper onto the desk. ‘British Government sent an expensive unmanned sub, ROV, down to that Lynx in the North Sea.’

‘She has nice breasts.’

Johno pointed at the opposite page.

‘To recover the Lynx?’ Beesely asked, squinting over his glasses at the headline.

‘No! You couldn’t salvage anything useful, all be ruined. They went to look at the bomb.’

‘Oh, right. So what did they find?’ He eased back.

‘Low levels of radiation, so they opened the box.’

‘They ... opened the box?’

‘And irradiated the fucking ROV, which packed up pretty quickly, all six million squids worth of it. When they brought it up they detected high levels of radiation, so had to cut it loose and let it sink. Then they sent down its twin, closing the box. It packed in and was too radioactive, so they cut that one loose –’

Beesely rolled his eyes. ‘Twelve million pounds of taxpayer’s money?’

‘Yep. Now the Europeans are sending a team to check on the radiation wafting around the North Sea, thanks to the British team opening the frigging box.’

‘How to win friends and influence people. Oh, by the way, what about that helicopter in *our* lake?’

‘What about it?’

Beesely shrugged. 'Can we salvage it?'

'Not at that depth. It's deeper than the frigging box in the North Sea! And why bother?'

'See who they were ... what equipment. Something useful may come of it.'

Johno turned the page of the newspaper. 'I'll get it depth scanned, I know they have a boat here with that on. If it's shallow we can have a poke around.' As he scanned the headlines he softly mentioned, 'You know what they found when they opened the box?'

'No. What?'

'Nothing but ball bearings. No explosives, no kind of mechanism.'

Beesely considered it. 'So they were ... what, just to be spread around? Dropped into the water supply maybe?'

'Tricky without a good suit made of fucking lead. Anyone handling the ball bearings would have been as bad as Ricky in thirty minutes.'

'So they were on their way to meet someone -'

'I considered that. It's the only explanation ... someone else with the bomb, just needed the ball bearings to stuff inside.'

'You don't sound sure?'

'Any arrests by MI5?' Johno toyed.

'None,' Beesely firmly answered.

'And yet ... every agent and copper in the UK would have been flat-out looking for them. So far ... didn't squat.'

Beesely folded his arms. 'Your theory, young sir?'

'That we all missed the main players, who must have been hung out in London. Right under *all* our noses. So either the main bomb crew were lucky, or very fucking good at what they do.' His phone went as Beesely puzzled that statement. 'Yeah?'

'Johno, it's Simon. There are nine new recruits just arrived if you want to frighten them.'

Johno jumped up. 'I'm on my way.'

'What's wrong?' Beesely asked, mildly concerned.

'New recruits.'

Beesely sighed. 'Johno, do you take some ... *sadistic* pleasure in shocking and frightening them?'

Johno gave it some thought. 'Uh ... yes.' He bolted out, leaving Beesely shaking his head.

The new recruits were lined up and ready for Johno, the instructors all in on the joke, the nervous newcomers not expecting anything more than a test exercise, a forced march around the mountain on this pleasant summer's day. Johno walked into the barrack room with a pronounced limp.

The first instructor clicked his heels and snapped a quick head-tip. 'Commandant.' Kev made a similar gesture, trying not to grin, but none of the English could mimic the Swiss very well.

'Where's Mr. Grey?' Johno loudly demanded of Simon.

Simon snapped to attention. 'He is on his way, sir. A fresh injury slows his progress.'

Johno nodded his acceptance of the excuse, making brief eye contact with Simon. He began his patrol of the line; new recruits, but hardly fresh faced. They were a mixture of ages from twenty-five to thirty-five. The oldest man looked tough, the youngest keen and attentive. He stopped at the elder man. 'Your previous experience?'

The man came to attention. In German-accented English he explained, 'Swiss Army six years, French Foreign Legion five years.'

Johno left him alone. Winding up this man would not be easy.

Grey limped slowly in. 'Sorry, sir, they had to operate on my knee.' He dragged his leg across as Kev closed in.

Johnno faced the line, hands on hips. 'OK, now listen up. You've all volunteered to join K2, and you all have an idea of what we do. We spy, we steal, we bug, we kill – and we get attacked.

'In recent months we've suffered a number of attacks, here at the castle, and we've lost guards. But keep in mind that if you're shot and injured we'll still make use of you here, you won't have to leave K2.'

He faced Kev. 'You see this instructor, he was shot just two weeks ago ... up the road at the castle.'

Kev took off his shirt, stepping closer to the line and displaying the recent scars from where he had been shot.

Johnno explained, 'The bullet went straight through, no major damage, just a slight loss of use of the left arm from time to time, a bit of numbness and pain when he sleeps.'

The recruits took in the scars, front *and* back.

'Kev here was back on duty within three days of being shot! Thank you, Kev.'

Kev dressed and stepped away, a sly glance at Mr. Grey unseen by the recruits.

Johnno beckoned Grey closer. 'Mr. Grey here has been working with us longer ... and has obviously been injured more often as a result.'

Grey limped forwards, his left hand tucked into his shirt. With his right hand he took out the apparently limp left arm and let it swing. With the one 'good' arm he unbuttoned his shirt, assisted by Johnno when he struggled with it. Wide-eyed, the recruits took in the scars. Grey made a slow limping circle for them to view all his scars, Johnno finally putting Grey's shirt back on for him.

'As you can see, we have a policy of keeping our staff, even after they've been wounded and wouldn't be employed by anyone else.' Now it was his turn. He handed Simon his jacket, eased off his shoulder holster and placed it around Simon's head then unbuttoned his shirt.

Even the elder recruit winced. The youngest appeared as if he might be having second thoughts.

Johnno stepped forwards. 'I have been shot seven times, blown up, stabbed and beaten.' Holding up his arms he did a slow spin around. 'You, gentlemen, need to know what you're here for. You are here ... to fight. Make no mistake - this is a dangerous occupation. Just by standing in this compound you're in danger.

He started to dress. 'A few months ago we suffered a nerve gas attack.'

'Nerve gas?' the elder recruit repeated.

'Yes. Some Bavarian Nazi's put a small nerve gas device in the castle restaurant, killed seven people. *Not* ... a pleasant way to die.

'We were then attacked by a hundred mercenaries sent by the CIA – that 'bank robbery', as the newspapers described it. But it was no bank robbery, and there's no gold here. They came to kill us – to destroy K2.'

The recruits glanced at each other.

'And in London we intercepted a radioactive dirty bomb. That bomb killed one of our best agents, dying a horrific death from radiation poisoning.'

He patrolled the line then wagged his finger. 'Make no mistake, gentlemen - if you work for K2 then you're in the front line. You'll be at risk *all* the time. You may be called upon to kill, to stand and fight ... and to risk your lives every day.'

He stepped backwards, taking in their faces. 'Is there anyone who has any second thoughts about joining us?' he softly asked.

The room fell silent, the instructors keenly observing. The recruits straightened, stood tall and erect. They even looked proud, Johnno considered. He waited, but no one flinched.

Johnno took a breath. 'OK. One of the things you will be required to do ... is to act upon orders without question.'

Two guards closed in behind Mr. Grey. Grey glanced at them, clearly concerned.

Johnno stated, pointing at Grey, 'This man has given us long and good service, but was noticed drinking on duty yesterday. He drinks to ease the pain he has, but this is no excuse, someone could have entered the camp, or there could have been an accident with a firearm.'

He turned and faced Grey squarely. 'Your injuries are no excuse. We've told you before.'

Grey lowered his head, making no comment.

Johnno pointed at the youngest recruit. 'Step forwards.' The man did so smartly. 'Punch him.'

The young man hesitated, glanced at Grey, back to Johnno, finally stepping closer to Grey. At striking distance he again stopped. 'This man is a cripple, sir,' he protested.

Johnno took a step towards the young recruit. 'If we caught a woman, a young and attractive woman, spying on us – would we take pity on her? If we did, we'd probably all be very dead, very quickly.'

The young man faced Grey, but still did not strike him.

'Back in line!' Johnno snapped. When the young man fell back into line with the others Johnno commented, 'Your honour will get you killed some day, son.' He pointed at the elder man. 'You! Forwards.'

The elder man walked quickly forwards and up to Grey, on the floor with a bloody nose a second later.

'Stand up!' Johnno barked.

The man clambered up, bewildered and holding his nose.

'Mr. Grey here may be a cripple, but he has worked for us for a long time. Never make that mistake again. Just

‘cause someone looks like a cripple, that doesn’t mean they are!’ He pointed at the next recruit. ‘You!’

The man stepped forwards.

‘Hit him!’

Cautiously, the man stepped towards Grey. He gave a feint to the left then attacked from the right. Grey bobbed one way then the next, a half step back and a chop to the inside of the man’s arm. The recruit’s pain was evident, shaking the arm and trying to recover its use.’

‘Back in line, arsehole!’ Johnno barked. He pointed at the next man. ‘Forwards.’

The next man walked forwards with a calm confidence. Johnno stopped him with a hand. ‘What’s your background?’

‘German Army, and various criminal gangs, sir.’

Johnno nodded. ‘OK. Hit him.’

Grey blocked the first move with his good arm. Then got hit. Johnno’s eyes widened.

As the man pressed home his attack, Grey suddenly starting to use his ‘limp’ hand, noticed by the recruits. And Grey was struggling. Blow after blow came in, quick and fast, Grey’s movements anticipated and countered.

Simon stepped closer as Grey took a series of body blows, now getting knocked about by the new recruit. Johnno was amused, but also surprised. As were the rest of the instructors.

Then Grey took a blow to the head, wobbling backwards. What had started out as trick to shock the new recruits was rapidly becoming a full-scale fight, both combatants seemingly equally skilled. And Grey was now looking worried.

Facing a relentless attack Grey took a step back, took a breath and seemed to stop. He adopted a different stance, not seen so far, as the man aggressively pressed home his attack. Grey hit him in solar plexus, knocking the wind out

of his attacker. He hit the man immediately in the throat, less force and from less distance – not so much force needed for the effect desired.

Winded, and now with the shock of a crushed windpipe, the man stopped – wide-eyed. Moving in half a step and leading with his shoulder, Grey thrust upwards with the flat of a palm into the man's nose before the recruit could react. The recruit's head got snapped back with the last blow, dead before he hit the floor. The instructors closed in, Simon quickly checking the man's pulse.

'Don't bother,' Grey said between breaths. 'He's dead.'

Johno stood over the body. 'You killed him?'

'I want his fingerprints and his ID back-checked,' Grey firmly requested, panting.

Johno glanced at Grey, at the body, then at the line of recruits – who were now looking more shocked than when he had displayed his torso. 'What?' he asked Grey.

'He's a plant,' Grey suggested.

Simon snapped his head up. 'A spy?'

Grey nodded, regaining his composure. 'Only place on the planet they teach the moves he made ... is in Japan, a select group of gangs. Yakusa.'

'Why the fuck would *they* be sending someone here?' Johno demanded.

'*They* ... didn't,' Grey calmly pointed out. 'That's where he was trained.'

Simon had knelt over the body. Johno now grabbed him by the shoulder, lifting him and spinning him around. 'Did his fucking record say he'd been to Japan?'

'No. No one here would be recruited if they had,' Simon insisted.

‘I want his record gone over!’ Johno barked. Simon lifted his radio and stepped away as Johno faced the line of recruits. ‘Not a word of this to *anyone*!’

He took a breath, calming a little as he took in their faces. ‘This man –’ he pointed at the body. ‘- was a spy sent to infiltrate us. If he had been captured alive then we would have tortured him for weeks. You’ve all heard about *the chair*, it’s no rumour.’ He pointed at the man with the nosebleed. ‘Go to the medics.’ An instructor led the man out.

Next he addressed the youngest recruit. ‘Learn to do what you’re told, when you’re told – or people will get hurt. Both you and your fellow agents.’

He stepped away then turned. ‘Oh ... and welcome to K2. Pastry’s are great, look out for curry night.’

Simon, Kev and Johno closed in on Grey.

‘You OK?’ Johno asked.

‘A bit sore here and there,’ Grey said with a shrug. ‘But a good lesson; teach me not to get complacent, especially around here.’

‘You nearly lost,’ Simon pointed out.

Grey focused on him. ‘I was trying to behave like a skilled cripple for a new recruit,’ he pointedly remarked. ‘It took three or four good moves on his part till I realised what he was. Then I killed him.’

‘Could have captured him!’ Johno complained.

‘Doubt it,’ Grey calmly responded, touching his face. ‘He would have been trained on how to swallow his tongue. Besides, one wrong move and he would have killed me. Which, is exactly what he came here to do.’

‘What?’ Johno puzzled.

Grey explained, ‘I don’t think this is about you. More likely he came for me.’

‘The Lodge sent him?’ Johno asked in a whisper.

‘Someone there, or connected, did. *They* ... are just about the only ones who have a small, select group of western agents trained in Yakusa techniques.’

Johnno grabbed Grey by the arm and led him out. ‘Beesely. Now.’

Beesely rubbed his forehead and sat back, staring at Grey for several seconds. ‘You know that it was me that set-up the Yakusa link.’

‘Someone’s idea of a joke?’ Grey asked.

Beesely gave it some thought. ‘Could be. Are you sure that *you* ... were the target?’

‘A new recruit wouldn’t get near the castle for six months, sir,’ Grey suggested. ‘I doubt anyone wanting you dead has the patience.’

‘But Henry is dead,’ Beesely noted, more to himself than Grey or Johnno.

‘Yes, sir. But his lieutenants are still out there.’

Beesely focused on Johnno. ‘There are not many agencies, in fact only one, that could fix this man’s past so well that we would not spot a problem.’

‘Lodge,’ Johnno stated. ‘That guy was recruited four weeks ago. And *we* approached him, not the other way around.’

Beesely nodded. ‘And did so for his links to, and knowledge of, the gangs he worked with. Someone ... knows our M.O.’

Otto stepped in. ‘We are going over this man’s record. So far, there are no problems. And we have identified two people who knew him many years.’

‘Pick them up,’ Beesely quietly suggested.

‘Already in hand,’ Otto answered.

Beesely explained, ‘If The Lodge *did* create this man’s identity then the witnesses will be none the wiser. They will have been ... *fed* a story over many years, this chap

flying in every few months and pretending he's been in town all the time. The only thing to look for is gaps, definite gaps when they could not swear they actually saw him. Those gaps will be when he was ... *away*.'

Johno eased forwards. 'So this was started when knob-head Henry was still alive.'

'Yes,' Beesely agreed. 'A time bomb. I shall have to see if I can devise some strategy for looking for such persons in future.' He focused on Grey. 'Well done, anyway. Good job you spotted that guy, albeit by accident.'

'Don't worry, sir. I'm sure Johno would have accidentally run him over before he could have done any real harm.'

Beesely offered Johno unhappy scowl. 'Whilst Mr. Grey is here, let's make good use of him. And his skills. You, my boy, could learn a lot. It may even help you to keep me alive longer. I am, after all, only mortal.'

'I've read your file, sir,' Grey began. 'And you certainly don't qualify as mortal.'

Beesely straightened, a proud smile. 'Thank you, Mr. Grey.'

Johno turned his head to Grey. 'Don't go getting him started on the bleeding war stories – we'll be here all day.'

'Mr. Beesely's record is remarkable. I don't even come close.'

Beesely eased his head towards Johno. 'Back in my day I could have whipped *your* arse, layabout!'

'Hah!' Johno let out, standing, Otto smiling smugly.

Beesely pointed towards the door. 'Go do some work. Runt!'

When Johno had left Grey commented, 'The apple fell far from the tree, sir.'

‘The bleeding apple fell from the tree, rolled down the sodding hill, got swept out to sea and ended up on a desert island being raised by ... wild pigs!’

Otto suppressed a grin, Grey smiling as he stood.

‘You sure you’re OK?’ Beesely asked, pointing at Grey’s cut face.

‘Of course.’

‘Don’t you start with the *of course*. I get enough of that from *him*.’ He jabbed towards Otto with his pen.

* * *

The next day offered a cloudless sky, but remained crisp and fresh, a magnificent view out over the lake and mountains. Johnno and Otto stood waiting outside the castle, stopwatches in hand, as crowds of staff and guards waited for the winner of the improvised road race. They glanced at each other as Mr. Grey came into view, groans echoing as guards lost bets to each other.

Grey glanced over his shoulder, but did not ease up the pace. He quickly came to a halt in front of them, glistening with sweat in his running vest and shorts. Out of breath, he panted in a controlled fashion, stood erect. Otto and Johnno walked a few steps, improving their view of the road; nothing, no K2 runners.

‘Bollocks,’ Johnno muttered.

‘Can I shower now?’ Mr. Grey asked, already mostly recovered.

‘Sure,’ Johnno reluctantly conceded, Grey walking down the compound.

Three minutes later the first SAS runner came in, ‘Swiftly’ Maddocks, former marathon champion. He looked completely spent as he halted, hands on hips, bent double and panting strongly.

‘Swift?’ Johno questioned. ‘Hah! You let the frigging Yank beat you, tosser!’

‘He’s good,’ Swift coughed out. ‘And I’m thirty-fucking-eight, tosser!’

Then came the first K2 man, to belated and sarcastic cheers and some rude suggestions.

Otto glumly stated, ‘This man, he was the marathon runner for Switzerland.’

* * *

Twelve K2 agents jumped down from vehicles and onto the gravel at Broadlands, greeted by Hans stood with his arms folded.

‘You been causing trouble, Hans?’ a man asked.

Hans shrugged. ‘It got *you* here, away from your desks and off your fat arses. What are the orders?’

‘Remove these people. *Any* way we like.’

Hans’ face slowly creased in a broad, sadistic smile.

* * *

Mr. Grey stood in shorts, vest and trainers, pads on his fists and feet. Directly opposite him stood his opponent, similarly dressed. Simon, the senior guard, stood a good five inches taller and four stone heavier; it appeared something of a mismatch.

Johno stepped onto the padded mat, the outdoor arena surrounded by two hundred onlookers. ‘Right, don’t forget, you’re on the same side - this is training. Don’t try and hurt each other. Too much.’ He stepped back and waved a hand.

Simon made the mistake of lunging forwards in attack. Grey closed the distance quickly, sidestepping, guiding Simon’s punch past his head with his left hand and

clocking him on the chin with his right - stood behind Simon a moment later as the big man wobbled, slumped and crumbled. Otto threw his stopwatch over his shoulder as groans went up. Money changed hands.

Next came SAS trooper 'Mavo', Third Dan black belt and former SAS instructor, a product of the infamous Abergavenny Karate School on the Herefordshire border. He stepped up confidently, watching Simon being carried off.

'Are you ready?' Johno formally asked.

Mavo bowed slightly, respectfully acknowledged with a nod by Mr. Grey.

'Fight!'

Mavo took a half step as the crowd shouted support. He adopted a defensive stance, hoping Grey would move his body weight and momentum forwards. But his opponent remained upright, smiling. Then Grey took a leisurely step forwards, just about to the distance where Mavo could land a blow or kick.

Mavo took the bait and quickly moved in with a fast sweeping leg. Grey launched upwards an instant later, a kick to the side of Mavo's head, landing softly as Mavo went down in the opposite direction. Dizzy, but not out cold, he could not continue. Groans filled the air.

Johno glanced at Otto, both peeved. He stepped onto the mat. 'Mr. Grey, put one hand down the back of your shorts.' Grey complied, bets hurriedly placed. Johno called out two more SAS troopers. 'Right, you two, kill the arsehole, or I'll kill you.'

Pulling on gloves they approached, one on either side of him. Grey angled himself so that he could see both opponents from the corners of his eyes, lowering his head slightly.

'OK,' Johno shouted as he stepped back. 'Start!'

The two troopers moved forwards, adopting fighting stances, Grey stood motionless. One trooper moved around behind him, then charged, his partner a moment later. Grey waited.

The first kick came in low. He blocked it with the flat of his trainer to a knee, shifted his weight and angled his hip, hitting the trooper square on the jaw a fraction of a second later. Swapping from one leg to the other he kicked out immediately the other way, catching the second trooper in the face. It was all over, loud groans of complaint filling the air.

2

Johno and Otto slumped into chairs in Beesely's office.

'Problems?' Beesely asked, noting their sighs.

'It's Mr. Grey,' Johno stated.

'Oh?'

'Yeah. We hate him,' Johno explained.

Beesely took off his glasses and held them, concerned.

'Not working out?'

'He is OK,' Otto offered. 'But we hate him.'

Beesely hid a smile. 'Why, pray tell, do you hate him?' He folded his arms and sat back.

'We can't find any faults with this guy,' Johno reluctantly admitted.

'Oh dear.' Beesely made a 'tut-tut' sound. 'Did he ... er... win the road race, perhaps?'

'Yep.'

'And the shooting competition?'

'Yep.'

'And the un-armed combat?'

'Don't even go there. He beat two troopers with one hand.'

‘Oh deary, deary me. What can we do?’ He put his glasses back on. ‘Let me tell you a secret. He does the job I used to do, back in the 1950s. I actually set up some of the training programmes that he’s benefited from.’

They both sat up, glancing at each other as Beesely continued, ‘You see, America is a much larger country than England, far more people to select from. A small fraction of them make it into their special forces. Of those soldiers some are selected to do *his* job. From a hundred they whittle the list down to just the one for the chairman’s bodyguard, the top candidate. And the fail rate is very high. So is the mortality rate, I’m afraid. In three years he goes through more than SAS troopers do in a lifetime, all intensely packed in. Yanks have no shortage of cash, or resources.’

‘It’s not fair!’ Johnno quietly protested. ‘When I got badged I had second-hand everything.’

Beesely smiled, addressing his file again. ‘Be grateful he’s on our side. Now, go and play nice, children.’ He smiled, looking up. ‘You know, that has a double meaning. The condescending ‘children’, and the reality.’

A manager appeared in the doorway holding an envelope. He hesitated at the door, but Beesely waved him in. ‘Sir, this was placed with a Bern solicitor by Herr Oliver Stanton —’ Beesely stopped smiling and straightened. Johnno eased upright. ‘- to be delivered to you seven days after his death or disappearance.’ He handed over the envelope and left.

Beesely quickly opened the envelope, impatiently observed by Otto and Johnno. The first page was blank except for just two words: Project Darwin. ‘Silent alarm,’ he quietly stated, making eye contact with Otto.

Startled, Otto jumped up and ran outside.

Johno jumped up and retrieved an MP5 from a cabinet, slapping a magazine in and cocking the weapon. 'How long 'til the bullets start flying?'

'Not long,' Beesely quietly answered as he read the second page. 'All managers.'

Johno stepped outside. 'All managers!' he called before returning. 'What is it?'

'You have your lighter with you?'

Johno fumbled through his pockets before handing it over. As Otto returned Beesely burnt the first page. They all watched the paper change colour, folding in on itself with a barely visible flame at the edges. It was just ash as managers began to arrive. Beesely grabbed the ash and mashed it up, making sure that no one could ever decipher what had been written on it.

Johno stood to the side of the desk as managers pulled out chairs. Otto remained standing, Herr Mole the last to arrive, pen and paper in hand.

Beesely took a deep breath and raised his head, slowly taking in all the faces. Finally he said, 'Apologies, ladies and gentlemen, but the fighting is not quite over yet. I have received today a letter from the late Oliver Stanton, placed with a Bern solicitor, to be delivered to me after his death - or if he could not be found. It explains, in part, why he was killed. It also goes somewhat towards explaining what the attack upon us was all about.'

He ran a hand across his scalp. 'That attack was always seen as a bit odd, since a large force attacked us in daylight - and not very well. Since then Johno has made his concerns felt and we have all considered what may have been going on. *Really* going on.'

'First, Johno surmised that the attack on us was planned years ago, long before I came here. I think that attack plan was made to kill Gunter, if necessary, by the CIA.'

Murmurs shot around the room.

‘They had a contingency plan for dealing with K2 if they had to. That’s not so unusual - they have plans for all sorts of contingencies, some very strange indeed. It is significant that the attackers arrived here without being detected, something of a massive failing by K2 on its home turf.’

Otto put in, ‘What we have determined is that they assembled outside Switzerland and drove across our borders inside lorries, not stopping or talking to anyone. The lorries let them out close to Zug. None were in Switzerland for more than a day, none used credit cards, none stayed in hotels or made calls on mobiles.’

‘Yes, very professional,’ Beesely agreed. ‘But then they went and attacked us in daylight, without being told of our strength. It was a deliberate distraction, of us and the Swiss authorities.’

‘For what purpose?’ Herr Mole enquired.

‘That, we shall have to unravel. Part of that distraction was the kidnap of Oliver Stanton. He was grabbed the night before the attacks took place. If we had not been distracted, and knew he was missing, we may well have used all our resources to try and find him - and those responsible. I would hope that we would have prevailed and found Olly, but we will never know. In addition to kidnapping Olly, I think part of the plan was to discredit or expose K2.’

‘Discredit us?’ Otto enquired.

‘With all those mercenaries getting killed, and all the fighting, I think Henry was hoping for the world’s press to descend on us and ask a lot of difficult questions. If we had been ... *exposed*, then we would not be able to operate well, we certainly would not be able to do what I propose to do next. And that, ladies and gentlemen, may be what

this was about - to stop me reacting to the piece of paper I just burnt.'

He held the remaining documents. 'It makes a little more sense now. Henry knew that if I got my hands on this -' he waved the pages. '- that I would be able to use K2 to probably stop him, and his plans. Olly suspected him, which is why he came here in person, probably to check out some facts and leave this document for me.' He took a measured breath. 'He probably knew that he would be killed.'

'Why come to us?' Johnno asked. 'He was Chairman of that powerful Yank group. So what could we do ... that they couldn't?'

'Because, quite simply, he would not have known who to trust in the US. Henry did not work alone - he had a lot of help. Question remains ... who? Otto, I want Mister Grey sent to the States immediately. Tell him to get in unnoticed and stand by. Tell him ... he will be going after those who killed Oliver Stanton.'

Otto stepped out.

'Herr Mole, using your own passport, get yourself to America on a normal flight. When you leave here you are on your own. The only thing on you connecting you to us should be your satellite phone. In fact, arrange that to get sent in the Swiss diplomatic pouch, several of them. Go.'

Mole stood and turned.

'Wait,' Beesely called. Mole turned back. Beesely ran a hand across his bald scalp, taking a breath before focusing on the odd little man. 'What is in this paper could turn out to be far more harmful to us than any dirty bomb. I know you have *commitments* here, but they are not as important as the mission I have for you. If this gets out ... it's all over.'

Mole took a moment to think. 'I understand,' he stated. He turned and limped out.

‘What *is* this about?’ Johno curtly asked.

‘I can’t go into detail, we have to make sure that we get as far as we can before we are noticed. Any loose discussion of this ... problem, and we could be compromised quickly. What I will say is ... that one part of the CIA is up to no good and the other part does not know about it. But, if what Henry was involved with goes ahead unhindered, the world will never be the same again.’

‘Well,’ Johno declared wistfully, ‘we had seven days in the sun. Should have known it was too good to be true.’ He slumped onto a cabinet, MP5 ready.

‘OK,’ Beesely began, taking a moment to think and staring down at his desk. ‘I want a massive examination made ... of anything that occurred in Switzerland from 6pm the night before the attack, to midnight the following day. Anything at all that may relate to ... well, anything unusual.’

Managers started making notes as Otto returned.

‘We were deliberately kept busy. I also believe that they wanted me dead, but that was a secondary consideration. Right, I want a list of all Americans and Canadians flying into Switzerland, France, Italy, Austria and Germany for a week before and flying out a week later. Their names should be cross-matched in any way we can, and against any databases we have. A team came here and did something without us noticing. I want them.’

He lifted the papers in front of him. ‘In particular, I want every chemical company, bio-sciences or research facility in Switzerland investigated, for anything that may have happened during that time period - the time of the attack. I want a complete list of reports not actioned by us during that time period, no matter how small or insignificant.’

He handed a manager one of the pages from Oliver's letter. 'These research facilities are to be very closely, but very discreetly, investigated for anything that may have happened when we were distracted. I also want to know everything about them - directors, shareholders, staff and projects. *Especially* ... what projects they worked on. Be discreet, but bribe or kill anyone in your way. I want results ... *at any cost.*'

The manager stepped out.

'Otto, I want plans made ready to destroy those facilities if necessary.'

'Destroy them?' Otto questioned.

'I can't explain yet, just make the plans.'

Otto made notes.

'Right, I want any agents we have who are old or female to be sent to the US, make use of diplomatic cover for some. Send them on regular flights looking like tourists and get some of our better agents there *without* going through passport control. In fact, send them indirectly, via Mexico or Canada. Otto, Johnno remain, rest of you to work please.'

3

The managers left quickly, the last man closing the door behind him.

'So, what *is* this about?' Johnno pressed, now moving around the desk and sitting.

Beesely studied the third sheet of paper. He sighed, 'What it is about stems back to the Vietnam War, when the CIA realised they could not win a conventional fight. They tried all sorts of weird and wonderful scientific experiments, including Agent Orange and a host of other chemicals - which just ended up giving their own troops cancer in later life. At one point they bred snakes,

poisonous ones, and dropped thousands of them along the Ho-Chi-Min trail.'

'What happened then?' Johno asked.

'The snakes ate the rats and the Viet Cong hidden food stores lasted longer. Not quite the desired effect.'

'Did the snakes attack people?' Otto enquired.

'Never saw any evidence of it. However, one experiment was way ahead of its time, far too early, the research just wasn't there to back it up.'

'And it is now,' Johno stated. 'And that knob-head, Henry whatever, he was involved?'

Beesely nodded, looking saddened. 'I am only guessing here, but I think Olly found out, that's why he went missing. I also think that Henry saw an opportunity when our Russian friend placed a bounty on my head; get rid of Olly, make it look like the Russian, attack and expose us - maybe even kill us, and at the same time distract us. I think that list I gave the managers was the reason for the distraction.'

'What was on the list?' Johno asked. 'Chemical companies? They into chemical warfare?'

'The labs probably played a part, but no, not chemical warfare. It's a Signature DNA virus.'

'What's that in English?' Johno curtly demanded.

'It's a modified virus that only targets members of certain ethnic groups. The original idea was that it would just attack the North Vietnamese, once sprayed on the jungle.'

'Did it work?' Otto asked.

'No, they never got that far. But technology, and genetics, has moved on a lot. If this project has been finished then they should be able to programme the virus for specific ethnic groups.'

'Like what?' Johno puzzled. 'Like Arabs?'

‘Yes, like Arabs. Problem is - where does the virus stop? It would not stop at the borders of say, Iran. It would keep going, affecting those who had the right genetic marker, which would include a lot of Europeans, South Asians, Indians and all of North Africa. Then it would probably keep going, mutating as it went.’

‘Handy. So if they use it, they could just wipe us all out,’ Johnno quietly stated.

‘They would not be so stupid,’ Otto protested, appalled at the idea.

Beesely agreed. ‘*They* ... probably would not, but I keep thinking about our Russian friend. He had the money to buy the virus blueprint or research.’

‘Why would he want one?’ Johnno shrugged. ‘They can’t programme it to attack the West, we’re too much like them.’

‘I don’t think the Russian target would be the West, rather the Muslims.’

‘Muslims? Why?’ Otto asked with a frown. ‘The Russians have no problem with the Muslims!’

Johnno pointed out, ‘You’re forgetting Chechnya. *They’re* Muslims.’

‘And probably very inbred with ordinary Russians,’ Otto scoffed.

Beesely began, ‘I read an article the other week: the Russians reckon that within two generations there will be more Muslims in the southern regions of the old Soviet group than ‘white’ Russians. And our Russian friends are just as racist as anyone else, if not more. They are very critical of what the British Government has allowed to happen to London.’

Johnno rubbed his moustache. ‘So this is that Boris guy’s idea for getting rid of them, right after he destroys the Western economy. He ends up President of a strong Russia, no Muslims to bother him. White Russian utopia.’

‘But Boris is in jail, his assets seized,’ Otto pointed out.

‘Yes,’ Beesely agreed. ‘So who has the virus? Did he take delivery?’

Otto sat back, deep in thought. Johno slumped, rubbing his moustache with a forefinger and thumb.

Beesely eased back in his chair. ‘There is another problem, unrelated to our Russian friends. Back in the seventies I helped to expose and shut down a project. It was the same virus technology, but this time aimed at America’s black population. You see, the only time they got the virus to work really well was when they targeted the gene for Sickle Cell Anemia. It worked almost one hundred percent effectively.’

‘Sickle Cell?’ Otto repeated.

‘A large proportion of the Afro-Caribbean population has the trait, dormant or active. This virus could wipe out twenty percent of them.’

‘White *American* utopia,’ Johno pointed out.

‘But the virus would go to Africa,’ Otto suggested.

‘Which would not make some CIA analysts unhappy. Africa has a massive untapped wealth of oil, metals and minerals. The only problem is the warring nations.’

Otto stood, clearly disturbed by what he was hearing. ‘I think we should report this to the American authorities.’

Johno got up as well. ‘The virus is not the biggest problem.’ They both quizzed him with their looks. ‘What happens if the blacks in America hear about it?’

‘Civil war,’ Beesely reluctantly admitted. ‘Followed by complete economic collapse of the States.’

‘Rapidly followed by every other country,’ Otto finished.

Outsourcing

1

Beesely sat transfixed. Three white boards on easels were spread across the left of his office, but so far there they revealed no obvious pattern or link. Directors were laid out; one had shares in two companies, the second run by his son. Companies were laid out; some manufactured for others, some handled research for the others. Nothing. No significant connections.

He swivelled his chair the opposite way. Another three white boards stood shoulder to shoulder, this time illustrating hotel guest lists, passenger manifests and listings of recent overseas visitors.

Johno sat opposite. He watched Beesely's furrowed brow move back and forth between the boards. 'You're straining your eyes,' he quietly pointed out.

'What?' Beesely asked without taking his studious gaze off the boards.

'Stand next to them. You're straining your eyes.'

'Yes, yes.' Distracted, Beesely continued to stare.

'Tell you what *would* help.'

Beesely turned. 'Hmmm? What? Help?'

'Dame Helen and the Detective.'

Beesely squinted as he thought then immediately brightened. 'My dear boy, you are absolutely right. This is just their game.' He tapped his desk phone. 'Have Dame Helen and Detective Hayes - oh, and their families of course - brought here. Tell them we have a crisis. Put the families upstairs, Dame Helen and Detective Hayes to my office. Send in Otto, please.'

'We'll need some desks in here.'

Otto stepped in a minute later.

‘Otto, I’ve sent for Dame Helen and Susan, they can help. Kindly have some desks brought in here, please.’

Otto hesitated. ‘Dame Helen is not well,’ he quietly reminded them. ‘And they will be in danger.’ Obviously concerned, he glanced across at Johnno before turning back to Beesely.

Beesely slowly stood, sighing. ‘I know,’ he quietly and apologetically began. ‘But this is too important. There are no innocent bystanders today.’

Forty minutes later the guests arrived, Dame Helen pushed in a wheelchair by Susan, Patrick in tow. Beesely sombrely greeted them, organizing tea and coffee.

‘Wow, what a set-up,’ Patrick let out.

‘Let’s just hope it is as efficient as it looks,’ Beesely glumly responded. Sitting on the fridge, Johnno waved lazily, MP5 slung over a shoulder.

Susan seemed concerned. ‘In the last ten minutes I’ve seen more armed men than I’d care to. What’s going on?’

‘Please, have a seat,’ Beesely requested. They pulled up chairs. ‘Dame Helen, I cannot apologise enough for bringing you here in your present condition, but I need your brain and your experience.’ He turned towards Susan and her husband. ‘And I need some good detectives. I have a puzzle to solve.’ He gestured towards the boards.

‘What’s happened?’ Dame Helen asked, clearly concerned.

‘It looks as if a rogue element of the CIA has perfected a geno-virus and has, or is trying to at least, sell it to the Russians. That is what the attack last week was all about.’

‘My God,’ Dame Helen breathed out.

‘What’s the frigs’ a geno-virus?’ Susan curtly demanded.

Johnno hopped off the fridge. ‘You release it ... and it kills just blacks, not whites.’

Her eyes widened. 'You what?'

Beesely cut in, 'It's a virus that can target ethnic groups, such as Arabs. Seems that the Russians may want to eliminate *all* of the Chechens. And others.'

'Problem is,' Johno began as he stretched his back, 'that it would probably be coded wrong and just kill everyone on the fucking planet.'

Beesely rested his weight on his hands, leaning across his desk toward them. 'Right now I'm in the co-pilot's seat, and you are all sat in the back of the helicopter. I'm asking a lot of you, I know, and we may be putting your families in harm's way by being here.'

Dame Helen asked, 'And how much harm would our families be in out there if Project Darwin goes live?'

Beesely straightened. 'You know about the project?'

She tipped her head at him. 'We helped them with the project.'

'We?' Beesely repeated.

'The British Government. When the US Congress tried to stop the research back in the nineties they farmed it out to offshore companies, far from prying eyes. More recently with their ban on stem cell research we offered to help. Last year.'

Johno laughed, pointing at Dame Helen. 'Give that woman a biscuit!'

'Sorry?' Beesely asked, turning.

Johno stepped to the white boards. Whilst still looking at the group he thumbed at the boards. 'Offshore biochemical companies?' he said with a large, false grin.

'By God, that's it!' Beesely boomed. He turned back to Dame Helen. 'They finished the project overseas! Right bleeding here in Switzerland.' He banged the table.

Otto regarded the boards. 'My God!'

Beesely declared triumphantly, 'That's why Olly came here in person, to check them out and to warn me!'

Johno added, stepping back to the desk, 'And that attack on us was to stop us noticing them covering their tracks - distract us, maybe even destroy us. With these bio-labs on Swiss soil they must've known that we'd be all over it sooner or later.'

'You have earned your keep, Helen,' Beesely announced.

'Still got to find it and stop them,' Johno glumly pointed out.

Beesely sat back down. 'Right, ladies and gentlemen. On these boards is what we think we know. We need to find patterns, links, coincidences.'

Patrick stood and took off his jacket. 'Keep the coffee coming,' he said as he approached a board.

Susan stood. 'Get me a laptop and web link.'

Otto stepped out as Johno wheeled Dame Helen to the other set of boards, fetching a pen and paper for her.

Ten minutes later Patrick turned from a board. 'Mister Beesely? Would it be fair to say that most Americans fly into the UK first, then connect to Switzerland?'

Beesely turned to Dame Helen, a questioning look.

'Yes, fair assumption,' she agreed.

'I need a phone,' Patrick stated.

Johno handed him his satellite phone. 'Just pretend that God is on the switchboard. Press green and ask away.'

Patrick pressed green. 'Hello?' he gingerly began.

'Operations.'

'I'd like to be put through to the switchboard of British Special Branch, London.' He waited.

'Scotland Yard,' came a woman's voice a few seconds later.

'Extension fourteen-ten, please.'

'Records?' came a moment later.

'Johnson, please.'

‘That you Paddy?’ came a familiar female voice.
‘Yes, get Johnson for me, quickly please.’
‘Paddy!’ came a man’s buoyant voice a few seconds later. ‘How’s Switzerland?’
‘Great, great. Listen, need a big favour, off the radar.’
‘Oh dear.’
‘Need passenger manifests of all flights to or from the US, last two weeks.’
‘What you up to Paddy?’
‘Helping out some Swiss friends,’ he whispered, being keenly observed.
‘Christ, you mean ... *you know who?*’
‘Yes. Can you get me those lists?’
Johno and Beesely watched with interest. Johno shrugged, noticed by Dame Helen.
‘Be my arse if I did buddy,’ the man down the phone pointed out.
‘My arse too,’ Patrick replied.
Dame Helen waved him over then grabbed the phone.
‘This is Dame Helen Eddington-Small.’
‘Ma’am?’ came a startled voice.
‘Do as he asks, or I’ll send his wife around to see you.’
‘Yes, Ma’am.’
Patrick finished his call, giving Johnson his email address. He hung up.
Dame Helen informed Beesely, ‘I could get those lists. You seem to overlook who I am. I’m injured and on leave, but still the head of SIS!’
Beesely cleared his throat and tapped the monitor in front of him. ‘This computer accesses the British Police National Computer –’ he made eye contact with Dame Helen. ‘- *and yours.*’
‘Should have figured that,’ Dame Helen said with a scowl.

Food was brought in, dirty plates taken out, fresh tea and coffee offered, Patrick and Johnno sneaking out for fag breaks in the courtyard. Beesely's office was packed with warm bodies as the first review meeting commenced an hour later.

'So, what do we know?' Beesely keenly asked.

'We have five American or Canadian visitors to those facilities,' Patrick offered.

'Any links between them?'

'Two sat next to each other on the flight from New York and the connection from Heathrow,' Susan explained.

'OK, good, I want those two people under the spotlight.' Managers took notes. 'What about their hotels?'

'They shared a hotel with two other Americans and one Canadian,' a manager offered.

'OK, look closely for a link, and check out the other three.'

'We have isolated five possible security incidents on the days in question,' Otto informed the group.

'What sort?' Johnno asked.

Otto glanced at his notes. 'Some files missing, some samples missing, a lab fire, an intruder sighted, a chemical leak injuring three researchers.'

'It doesn't seem very significant,' Beesely complained. 'If they were covering their tracks they would have been more ruthless, destroying the labs.'

'Not if they didn't want us to jump right on it,' Johnno pointedly remarked.

'Yes, perhaps,' Beesely admitted. 'Let's assume that these labs were involved with a chemical weapon development programme.' That was for the benefit of the

managers, not let in on the full story. 'I want the best scientists we can find at short notice, who could probably figure out the science behind what these labs were doing.'

Otto eased his head forwards. 'We indirectly own majority shareholdings in three of these labs. We can order the people here.'

Beesely suddenly felt foolish. 'Do so. Quickly please. With records of what they were working on.'

Susan asked, 'I know none of you are scientists, but what would you need for this chemical or biological weapon? Would you need a vat full of the stuff, a small sample or just instructions on how to make some?'

People glanced around at each other.

Johno suggested, 'You'll need a sample of the stuff.'

'And to transport it?' she asked.

'Frozen, I guess,' Johno said with a shrug. Then he turned to Beesely with a slight frown. 'Fat bastard?'

'Mr. Short!' Beesely tapped his phone. 'Put me through to Mr. Short, Secure Transit Limited, London.'

They waited.

'Yes? Beesely?'

'Mr. Short, how are you?'

'Good, good. Things going well. Do you guys need something... moved?'

'No, I need to know if you moved anything discreetly from mainland Europe last week to the States.'

'Moved lots of things. What you looking out for?'

'Frozen samples. Secure package, temperature controlled.'

'Hang on.' They could hear keyboard tapping. 'Right. Frozen samples from Germany, France and three from Switzerland. Were they yours?'

'Not quite. I want all the details faxed to me ten minutes ago - my operator will give you the number. Oh, and Mr. Short, not a word of this to anyone.'

‘Of course.’

‘And I want the billing and delivery info, credit cards, etc.’

‘I’ll print them off now.’

Beesely hung up.

‘Lucky break,’ Johnno suggested.

‘My dear boy, why do you think I recruited him in the first place?’ Beesely proudly pointed out, causing Otto to smile. ‘Right, what else?’

‘Trace the money,’ Susan suggested, her husband agreeing. ‘Always trace the money.’

‘Probably passed through here anyway,’ Dame Helen suggested.

Beesely lifted his gaze up to Otto, a grin creasing one cheek.

‘I’ll call them,’ Otto said with a smile.

‘OK, everyone, one hour break.’ He clapped his hands together and they started to empty the room. ‘Helen, you OK?’

‘Even if I’m not, this is one fight I’m not missing. These bastards took my daughter away from me.’

Susan stopped and snapped her head around. ‘What?’

Beesely lowered his head and sighed. ‘The people behind this, *they* were the ones that rammed Helen off the road.’

Dame Helen lifted her head towards Susan, an angered, yet confident expression. ‘So I’m not leaving until we nail this lot.’ Stunned, Susan and her husband wheeled out Dame Helen.

3

Thirty minutes later the leader of the Society and his deputy arrived by helicopter, a short flight from Zurich,

Beesely welcoming them into his office. They noticed the boards and enquired about the tight security.

‘We have another problem,’ Beesely admitted. ‘And I need your help.’

‘We are not the army!’ their elderly leader suggested, his accent thick and his words slow.

‘It is not an army I need, it is to find some bank transactions.’

They glanced at each other. ‘What is happening?’

Beesely settled himself behind his desk. ‘Those radioactive bombs in Bavaria and England - it was a Russian, Boris Luchenkov,’ Beesely carefully pronounced, speaking slowly and clearly for them. ‘He tried to buy a chemical weapon from some Americans. If it is used, millions could die.’

Again they glanced at each other. ‘What do you ask of me?’ the old man said, clearly concerned.

‘I need details of large sums of money passing through Swiss clearing houses, from Russia or from Russian oil sales, going to American accounts, maybe Caribbean tax havens.’

‘What you ask is not ... legal. The Swiss government would not be the happy.’

‘*You*, my friend, *are* the government,’ Beesely quietly, but firmly pointed out. He could not be sure if he detected a slight hint of a smile in the old man.

‘We can make not the promise. And if there is any more ... *opportunities* with the stock markets...?’

‘I shall let you know straight away.’

The old man and his deputy stood, shook hands politely and left, leaving Beesely watching curiously after them.

* * *

Beesely woke from his chair-nap and hour later, walking out to the command centre and glancing at his watch. He sought out Otto, signalling for a meeting. It took ten minutes to assemble everyone.

‘Right,’ Beesely began, accepting a fresh coffee. ‘What have we discovered?’

‘Got the passenger manifests,’ Susan offered. ‘Some don’t match up, so someone has altered a computer somewhere. Fortunately, the good old-fashioned British Police still back up to magnetic tape.’

‘Good. What do we have on these new players?’

Susan continued, ‘I think we have a group of seven, all linked. Six Americans and one Canadian.’

Dame Helen informed them, ‘I ran them through the link we have with the US immigration computer. That was, before we received a high level enquiry as to *why* from across the pond.’

‘Really? Hit a nerve, did we?’

‘Yes, they’re CIA,’ Dame Helen explained. ‘Two are US Army doctors of some sort.’

‘That would make sense. Unfortunately, they are now onto us. We have had our time in the shadows, now we can expect some trouble.’

‘Here?’ Susan asked, clearly concerned.

‘No,’ Beesely said confidently. ‘After what happened last week the Yanks will be reeling. Another American attack and they’ll be at war with Europe. Maybe something subtle and small scale, a few snipers –’

‘Snipers!’ Susan barked. ‘Our rooms have windows!’

‘My dear Susan, your windows are bullet proof.’

Otto was handed a sheet of paper by a manager. Standing, he studied it as he slowly took a few steps forwards. ‘Bank transfer details,’ he stated. ‘From the Society. They are coded.’

‘Coded?’ Beesely repeated.

‘Bank short-codes, all numeric,’ Otto explained, not having looked up.

‘Can we decipher it?’ Dame Helen enquired.

‘Otto spent twenty years running a Swiss bank,’ Beesely proudly announced. He lifted his head. ‘Any use, Otto?’

Still reading Otto informed them, ‘One transaction, from the Amsterdam oil market, five hundred million dollars, authorised by a bank in Tomsk, Siberia, routed – unusually - direct to a Cayman Islands account, a bank that is well known for its ... *discretion*.’

Beesely stood. ‘Right, that bank in the Cayman Islands, buy it!’

‘No need,’ Otto quietly suggested, still studying the paper. He glanced quickly at Dame Helen. ‘They work for us, indirectly.’

‘Really? Let’s put some pressure on him, then,’ Beesely suggested.

‘No need,’ Otto repeated without looking up. He took out his phone. ‘Grand Cayman Bank, Mister Dupont.’ He waited. ‘Mr. Dupont? Herr Director, K2, Switzerland. I want to know about account 1928-3829-887. Quickly, please.’ He waited. ‘How much? It is still there. Transfer it to us immediately. Yes, it is ours, stolen by a member of staff. You will be rewarded, one half percent. Be quick, and no discussion of this.’ He hung up.

‘Did you just do what I think you did?’ Beesely asked, a stunned look.

Otto glanced at a manager and the man ran out. ‘Yes, I took their money.’

Johno stepped towards him. ‘You nicked their five hundred mil’?’

Otto nodded, seemingly insulted by their surprise at his action.

Johno held up his hand, forefinger and thumb almost touching. 'Are they going to be just a teensy-weensy bit pissed at us?' Otto shrugged.

'Beesely,' Susan called, pointing at herself. 'New washing machine.'

When the manager returned he announced, 'It is there.'

'Hide it,' Otto ordered, the man sliding back out of the door immediately.

'Right.' Johno rubbed his hands together. 'They got the chemical weapon, we got their money. Now what?'

'Good question,' Beesely said as he sat. 'I would suppose that they'll come after us, after their money.'

'And you'll cut their bollocks off, right?' Susan asked.

'We'll certainly give it a good go. But we still need to get that weapon, which is probably in America. Do we have that list from Mister Short?' A manager handed him a copy. 'OK, let's get back to it. Everyone, let's keep at these boards and links in case we are missing anyone or anything.' The managers filed out.

Johno remained. He suggested, 'Maybe they'll trade their money for the virus?'

'Depends on whether or not the Russians have it already,' Beesely glumly stated.

'The one thing you've not done so far ... is talk to those Yanks at The Lodge?' Johno nudged.

'And for good reason,' Beesely replied without looking up, studying the pages on his desk.

'Don't know who to trust?' Johno probed.

Beesely glanced up at him and nodded. 'Henry could not have been working alone.'

'Why not get them all together on speaker-phone and spill the beans like before?' Johno suggested.

'And risk it getting out? No, that could cause more problems than it solves. I need to remove the damaged organ *without* the body knowing about it. If this gets into

the American press ... besides, they have my number, and so far no call to say how their investigations are going.'

As Johnno turned to walk out he said, 'So that guy Henry was in it for the money.'

Beesely drummed his fingers across the desk. 'In it for the money,' he quietly repeated. 'In it ... for the money.'

Stocks, shares and options

1

Otto walked back in. 'You called?'

'Yes, yes. Sit.' Beesely hurriedly gestured to the nearest seat. He picked up his pen, selecting a clean sheet of paper. 'Right, stock market trading - you're an expert, right?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Of course,' Beesely agreed with a smile. 'Right, what can we do to make the US stock market jump around?'

'The Dow Jones it is called, a collection of its top companies. What can we do? It is a large market, much bigger than London, but there are certainly some things we can do to affect daily movements. But there are laws and rules, we would attract attention, and maybe the Swiss Government would not be so happy.'

'Oh? Can it be done without anyone noticing?'

'To a lesser degree.'

'What is in that combined fund, us and the secret bank Society?'

'Three point one billion,' Otto stated.

'Is that a lot? I mean, for stock trading?' Beesely asked.

'It is a good size, but not so big in comparison to others. Our strength is in the fact that we have discretion to use it as we please, not according to fixed rules.'

'So, if we knew that the US market was going to dip we could make some money from that knowledge?' Beesely asked.

'We would buy short index options, 'puts', or sell index futures. Then, when the market falls we would make

money. But afterwards, the Americans may see it ... and ask questions.'

'I'm not worried about that,' Beesely insisted. 'What else? What else can we do?'

Otto gave it some thought. 'We increase the volatility and then sell index options. We make money even when the market goes sideways.'

Beesely made notes. 'I won't pretend I understand that, but ... but good.'

'Markets move on rumours. If we started a rumour that may have an effect on its own.'

'That's good too.' Beesely keenly took notes.

'There are two different levels of market trading - public and institutional.'

'Institutional?' Beesely repeated.

Otto explained, 'Large investment companies, pension funds, they make large transactions outside of the normal stock market, they go direct to the buyers and sellers. The public, they go through the computerised system - large numbers of small transactions; they do not know the person they are buying or selling from.'

'What if we used large sums ... in this public system thing?'

'It would move quickly and volatility would increase.'

Beesely checked his paper. 'And then we would ... sell options, yes?'

Otto nodded, regarding Beesely carefully. 'What do you have in mind, and why?'

'Just an idea at the moment, we'll think about it later. Right, companies and their controlling shares, how does that work?'

'In which country?'

'You mean it varies?' Beesely asked, a puzzled look.

'Yes.'

'Oh.' Beesely considered it. 'Well, say the US.'

‘If it’s a public listed company then any majority shareholder or group with more than five percent of shares takes control, or defers its voting rights if they are simply investors.’

‘Only five percent? Great!’

Otto seemed suspicious, a slight frown forming. ‘What are you thinking of?’

Beesely cracked a wry smile. ‘I’m thinking, my boy, that we may be going about this the wrong way.’ He took a breath. ‘OK, those Swiss chemical and bio-science companies - we have shares in some?’

‘Yes, we have majority shares in three, but we do not *run* the companies, we elect investment managers, they sign over their voting rights to the company board.’

‘But we *could* run them? Directly?’

‘Yes.’

Beesely eased back. ‘Do so. Immediately. Send in teams of our people, I want full control. I want every project analysed in detail—’

‘We have already arranged that.’

Beesely waved his pen threateningly. ‘But can we be sure that ... at some point in the future this will not happen again?’

‘I understand,’ Otto offered.

‘Those other companies, can we buy controlling shares? Without wasting money?’

‘We have an extra half-billion to use,’ Otto reminded him, barest hint of a professional Swiss grin.

‘While I think of it, send ten percent to the Society, thank them.’ Otto made a note. ‘Then buy those shares. When we have control, send in a team.’

Otto’s eyes widened. ‘For all the companies on that list? Some are very large.’

‘Can we use our bank’s managed funds as a sensible investment?’

‘Yes, of course. This is why the bank already has shares. But the bank cannot run the companies, an investment management company would have to be elected, then a board selected.’

‘Do we have one of those?’

‘Several, in many countries,’ Otto cheerfully explained.

‘Good, good.’ Beesely ran a hand over his scalp. ‘I think I have a plan, a lesson from your book. You see, I think the Americans made a fatal mistake.’

‘They outsourced,’ Otto coldly suggested.

Beesely made strong eye contact. ‘Yes, they did. If this germ crap was developed in some American military lab we would have a problem, but *they* ... are audited by Congress these days. So we have them by the short and curlies.’

‘Short and curlies?’ Otto carefully repeated.

‘Pubic hair!’

‘Ah. I see.’ He didn’t. He stood, a slight frown. ‘I will send the Society the money, I am sure they will be happy. The scientific reports and scientists will be here soon.’

Beesely raised his eyebrows. ‘That was quick!’

‘They are mostly based near Zurich.’

‘Gather them upstairs, in the restaurant, make sure it is empty when they arrive. These scientists –’

‘They are K2 men.’

‘Excellent. In which case, bring the perishers down here.’

2

Kirkpatrick stood and welcomed a uniformed Delta Force Colonel into his Pentagon ‘D’ Ring office.

‘Come in, Colonel. Have a seat.’

‘I’ll stand,’ the Colonel stated with cold menace. ‘This won’t take long.’

Kirkpatrick hovered above his seat, studying his guest before easing down. ‘Problems, Colonel?’

The officer threw down the thick file he had walked in with. ‘When I first received this I thought it was maybe an exercise, some scenario - a paper exercise only. But then I noticed the satellite photos and the witness statements and appraisals, so I wondered why we may be planning a sneak attack on a Swiss bank installation –’

‘It’s not a bank!’ Kirkpatrick quietly, yet firmly insisted.

‘I know that ... *now*. You know how? I tracked down the sole survivor of that half-arsed attack on this same *facility* just two weeks ago. The guy was crying his heart out on the Internet for anyone who’d listen.’

‘Did he co-operate?’

‘Oh, he was very helpful. Of course, the guy’s a bit of a basket case now, having been forced to watch all the wounded survivors get slowly burnt alive. Dare say he has some *issues*.’

Kirkpatrick eased back.

The officer continued, ‘Of course, it may affect any soldiers selected for a mission like this, knowing what happens to them if they are wounded or captured. These Swiss freaks make the Viet Cong look like girl scouts!’

He took a breath and sat, dropping a notch in anger. ‘I’ve done what you asked, I’ve reviewed the installation. The question was, could a covert team get in there and destroy it? Well, I spoke to the survivor, put together a list of men and equipment in that compound. Then I had a chat to an old buddy in Mossad, seems they supplied this facility with millions of dollars worth of sensing kit - top of the range stuff that *we* could not detect, nor hope to

evade. Sensor grids with computer links, thermal cameras, motion sensors, fucking underwater sensors!’

‘Can it be destroyed if necessary?’ Kirkpatrick pressed, now getting angry himself.

‘*Everything* can be destroyed if necessary. But your question was - *can it be destroyed discreetly*? The answer to that is ‘no’ - not by a frontal assault, the firepower needed would be noticed by the Swiss authorities. Plus estimated casualties of around a hundred of our troops. They have pillboxes, snipers with fifty calibre rifles, surface to air missiles and, apparently, a squadron of Apaches.

‘I did not see a lot of that detail mentioned in your request! This is not a military job, Mister Kirkpatrick. If you want into that place, it’s a spook job - softly, softly.’ He stood. ‘And good luck.’

* * *

‘OK, crazy people,’ Johno called.

Men waved and smiled, most sat now on deckchairs in the hotel grounds and enjoying the weather. Several were in gym kit, jogging around the hotel gardens, one now walking hand-in-hand with a prostitute.

Dr. Manning walked out. ‘Johno,’ he flatly offered.

‘What’s up, Doc?’ Johno said with a playful grin.

Manning gave him a disappointed look. ‘We’ve had to put an alcoholic into cold turkey.’

‘Pity,’ Johno offered, not too concerned. ‘Don’t worry about rules and regulations, Doc. Force him cold turkey.’

‘Can’t say I approve of a lot of this, but it does seem to be helping a number of them. Two want to work for you straight away, they keep asking.’

‘Fine. Tell them they have to pass the physical, push them to get fit and call us, we’ll get them on the shooting range for a day.’

‘What about family visits?’

Johno shrugged. ‘Send a Learjet or something bigger for the families, should do them the world of good. But let’s hide the hookers on *family day*, eh?’

Two men walked out in gym kit. ‘Right, Boss?’ they called, smiling and waving as they started jogging.

Johno and Manning watched them go. Manning sighed, ‘One of those tried to kill himself a year ago. I saw him for a while before he moved away and stopped attending sessions. He did a few months inside for assault.’

‘I’ll fix him,’ Johno confidently suggested.

‘With the resources you have here you may well do that.’

‘Do they chat to you?’

Dr. Manning studied Johno for a moment. ‘Yes, strangely enough.’ Johno focused on him, a questioning expression as he lit up. Manning continued, ‘At first they didn’t bother when it was made clear to them, *by you*, that they didn’t have to. Now just about half of them volunteer for sessions.’

Johno nodded. ‘Good. What about you, you OK?’

Manning’s eyes narrowed. He took a long breath. ‘You’re not the man you were a year ago, Johno.’

‘Ain’t that the truth. But keep it quiet, I’m still playing the sympathy card.’

Manning grinned.

‘Anything you need, Doc?’

‘No, your representative here fixes everything before I even mention it. Damned annoying.’

Johno laughed. ‘Welcome to Swiss efficiency. This ain’t fucking British Rail, Doc!’

Beesely's office was large, but it now seemed cramped with all the attendant warm bodies. The managers were present, there being was no room for deputies. The three scientists sat at one end, everyone facing them: one a biochemist, one a geneticist and one a doctor specialising in biochemistry. Ranged in front of them were the known research projects from the affected laboratories and chemical companies.

'Gentlemen,' Beesely began, stood now between the puzzled and nervous scientists, and the rest of the staff. 'In front of you are files relating to research projects in a number of laboratories in this country.' He suddenly stopped. 'Oh, sorry, you all understand English?' They nodded.

'Good, good. Right, we believe that the Americans were using these facilities to develop biological weapons or viruses.' The scientists were shocked. 'We need to know what they were up to. Behind you are white boards with marker pens, please go through the files and add the summary to the boards. Feel free to talk loudly about what you find and what you assume as you go. Coffee in ten minutes.' Beesely sat back down.

The scientists glanced at each other for several seconds before the eldest man stood and grabbed a marker pen. 'OK, give me the company names.'

The remaining two men read the file names and companies from the outside of the multi-coloured plastic folders. The elder scientist listed them on the board, spreading them across laterally. Then immediately, without further reference, he started to write underneath the names the types of services they offered, four or five sections for each - from memory.

Beesely glanced at Otto. Otto tipped his head and cracked a small smile of approval.

Next the elder scientist started to ask for projects, listing them for each company. When he had finished the other two men stood up and grabbed pens. They moved the tables away so that they could walk freely in front of the boards. Each man used a different coloured pen to draw lines of common links between the five listed companies, twenty-four listed services and almost fifty projects.

Ten minutes later Beesely tapped his phone. 'Tea and coffee,' he whispered.

The scientists continued for another five minutes then seemed excited about something.

Beesely stood. 'Something?'

'Yes, we think so. This is not a complete picture, other companies must have been involved.'

'Such as who?' Beesely asked.

They discussed it amongst themselves and wrote in the names of extra companies at the end of the board. Otto sent a manager to the board. The man copied down the names and hurried out.

'Well?' Beesely pressed.

The scientists turned. The elder man said, 'There is a common factor between these companies and some of the projects. It was easy to find when you pointed towards the given projects. It is Sickle Cell research and gene therapy.'

Beesely turned and glanced at the staff, a knowing look.

The lead scientist added, 'They are attempting to use gene therapy to turn the dominant Sickle-Cell trait into recessive.'

Beesely nodded. 'And what if they had it wrong ... the other way around?' he delicately probed.

The scientists all stared down the long office with puzzled expressions. 'Then they ... would make healthy people sick,' the elder man said.

'Gentlemen, take these boards and files with you.' Beesely turned to Otto. 'Otto, find them an office to use.' Addressing the scientists he ordered, 'I want that map of companies expanded. I want to know everything about that project and who was involved, no matter where in the world. Your resources are unlimited. I especially want to know about American companies involved in this.'

They were about to leave with the boards when Beesely called, 'Gentlemen, gene-therapy - why might these companies need to send frozen samples to the States?'

They shrugged. 'For the first test subjects, to be injected into the bone marrow.'

'And where might that be done?'

The elder scientist explained, 'A hospital that specialises in such matters, a genetics department. Most likely a university research department of medical genetics.'

'Thank you, gentlemen. Please work quickly.' They left.

After staring at the floor for a moment Beesely turned to a manager. 'I want a list of all hospitals or clinics, anywhere in the world involved in ... what he just said.' He sat as tea and coffee was brought in.

'Not an attack on Muslims?' Dame Helen asked.

'No one is going to pay for making Afro-Caribbeans sick!' Susan added. 'It doesn't make sense.'

'Yeah, it does,' Johnno stated. They all focused on him. 'You got to test your product someplace first.'

'Test it?' Susan repeated, a disgusted look.

‘Sure,’ Johnno said. ‘They test in on American blacks, refine it, then switch the gene marker thingy around to Arabs. Same bullet, different target.’

Beesely rubbed a hand across his scalp. ‘So, Boris wasn’t buying it for immediate use.’

‘Russian elections in a years’ time,’ Dame Helen pointed out.

‘Time for manoeuvring,’ Beesely coldly stated. ‘Or a thorough field test of the technology, on something innocuous.’ He sipped his tea then tapped his phone. ‘Get me Elle Rosen.’

‘Can *they* be trusted?’ Johnno asked, concerned. ‘*They* would love a weapon against Muslims.’

Beesely took a breath. ‘There is one very good reason why *they* will help us.’

Dame Helen suggested, ‘Their genetic markers would be very close to that of the Arab world.’

‘Close enough,’ Beesely emphasised.

‘Shalom?’ came from the phone.

‘Elle, Beesely, bit of a crisis. Need you and a senior decision maker here today. Jet on its way.’ He pointed at a manager, the man raising his phone.

‘Beesely, do you go looking for trouble, my friend?’

‘Yes. Get here quick, WMD threat to Israel.’ He hung up.

‘That’ll get the juices going!’ Johnno suggested with a concerned look.

‘OK, let’s shake the tree and see who falls out.’ Beesely tapped his phone. ‘David, at The Lodge in Virginia, please.’

He put his fingers to his lips, so they all understood to be quiet, as clicking could be heard.

‘How may I direct your call?’ came an American accent.

‘David, please. Beesely here.’

‘One moment, sir.’ They waited.

‘Beesely, how’re things in Europe?’

‘Surprisingly good for a change. Are we on speaker phone?’

‘Yes, top five members here. Did you wish to address the full group?’

‘No, nothing important, just to say we’ve pinched the money.’

‘The ... money?’

‘Yes, the money Boris paid Henry. We have one of the Russians and one of Henry’s people, turned them with a little persuading,’ he lied, glancing at the managers. ‘Took the bank details and access codes, grabbed five hundred million dollars. You know, I have always fancied a string of hotels of my own, maybe now I’ll buy one.’

‘That’s ... good news, Beesely. Hope it gets used purposefully.’

‘Oh, it will. Any news your end?’

‘We’re still mopping up.’

‘Good, good. Anyway, thought I’d let you know the good news. Bye.’ He hung up, his features shifting down quickly from pleasant to businesslike.

Johnno edged closer. ‘Why don’t you just put up a fucking sign outside? Come shoot at us!’

‘We don’t know that anyone else there is involved,’ Beesely insisted, flat palm towards Johnno. ‘But if they are this will flush them out.’

‘And seriously piss them off!’ Johnno added, helping himself to a biscuit.

‘If they come our way ... then fine,’ Beesely insisted, his head lowered.

‘Will they?’ Dame Helen asked. ‘Come our way?’

‘I hope so,’ Beesely answered, steel in his voice. ‘We have to stop them, and the best way of doing that is still an old fashioned bullet between the eyes.’

‘This time,’ Otto began, ‘no one is paying them. I do not know if they will use their own money for such an adventure. Not for revenge. They will be using more money to chase after lost money. And we are more than ready.’

Susan eased forwards. ‘Beesely, I’m a tough old boot, but my family are here.’

Beesely faced her. ‘Right now this is the safest place. If I thought otherwise I would send you off. Don’t worry,’ he reassured her. Then softer, ‘Of course, you are free to go whenever you please if you wish to. Same for you Helen.’

‘I’m staying,’ Dame Helen quickly insisted, turning to Susan.

After a moment Susan glanced at her husband.

‘I’m in,’ he offered with a shrug.

‘OK,’ she said with a loud sigh. ‘What’s next?’

‘What’s next is that Otto deploys our full force,’ Johnno suggested.

Otto stood and walked out with two managers.

‘Full force?’ Susan asked.

Johnno grinned. ‘You ain’t seen nothing yet, Detective. Those soldiers outside, they’re just the compound guard - another *five hundred* behind them. Plus our air force.’

Susan cocked an eyebrow. ‘You have an air force?’

‘We don’t just go around on tractors, love,’ Johnno said with a wink.

Beesely said, ‘Susan, Patrick, Helen, check in on your families please. When you are ready, back to the passenger manifests and common links. And don’t worry - the rooms upstairs have six foot thick walls, all sorts of detectors, bullet proof glass and there’s a twelve-man SAS team on the ground level.’

‘Bloody hell!’ Patrick let out. He and Susan wheeled out Dame Helen.

* * *

Otto and Beesely were sat making plans as a manager rushed in. 'Sir, one of the American men on the list, we have found him. He used his credit card in New York, a hotel at the airport, a Herr Glass.'

Beesely glanced at Otto then addressed the manager. 'Send Mr. Grey if he has already reached the States, if not use one of our men.' The manager disappeared. Beesely turned to Otto. 'Did he say credit card use?'

'Yes, we have their credit card details from their airline tickets, hotel use –'

'Could you transfer money, you know, *into* their bank accounts?'

'Yes. We traced their private bank accounts. What did you have in mind?'

Beesely sat staring out of focus. 'Right. Transfer a couple of million to that Russian we use –'

'Vladimir?'

'Yes. And get him to transfer a couple of million from the bank account of a known gangster - hopefully one in Siberia - into to the account of Mr. Glass. In fact, to all of the men on our list.'

Otto cocked a surprised Swiss eyebrow, then smiled and stood up.

'Oh, Otto, transfer *another* twenty million odd to this Russian and ask him what he can find out about Boris' empire and what he can do to ... you know ... generally *fuck him up*, as Johnno so eloquently puts it.'

'I hope we do not adopt too many of Johnno's sayings in our business life.'

* * *

Pepi stepped down into the villa's basement, his visitor waiting. 'Sir. Pleasant journey?'

'Fine, fine. What news?'

'We now know what the strange attack on K2 was all about.'

The visitor straightened. 'Jah?'

'Henry O'Sullivan, and a rogue element of the CIA, were conducting germ warfare experiments in laboratories around the world, because – it seems - the US Congress has banned them in America. They had many projects running in Swiss laboratories,' Pepi reported. 'All of which seem to have had sensitive projects and research removed on the day of the American mercenary attack.'

'Mein gott.'

Pepi tipped his head. 'K2 believes that Luchenkov paid Henry O'Sullivan half a billion dollars for this research.'

'What? The Americans would never sell this research to the Russians!'

Pepi smiled.

'What is it?'

'This germ, if released, would kill Arabs, not westerners.'

'Ah, so ... if the Russians release it –'

'They ... get the blame.'

The German smiled. 'I like this man, he should have been working with us! He was playing Luchenkov better than we were!'

'And now K2 are wasting their time going after all the people involved in this research, putting themselves at odds with the CIA.'

Across the pond

1

Mr. Glass stepped out of the shower to find Mr. Grey standing in front of him. They stared at each other for a moment; Glass surprised but controlled, the stranger oddly calm.

‘What are you doing in my room?’ Glass demanded, thinking it some simple mistake.

‘I’m in the service of my country,’ came the cold answer.

Mr. Glass started towelling himself dry, hoping to buy some time as he thought. He was in his early fifties, greying and overweight. The faded tattoo on his forearm was US Marines. ‘If you’re in the service of your country then you probably know who I work for. I’m also in the service of my country.’

‘Do you like puppies?’

Glass frowned at the stranger. ‘What?’

‘Puppies. Do you like puppies? I have some to find homes for.’

‘What the hell are you talking about?’ Glass demanded, getting louder.

‘My previous boss, he had a dog, third set of Labrador puppies.’

‘Previous boss?’ Glass delicately probed.

‘Oliver Stanton.’

Glass paused mid-wipe before continuing, ‘Yeah, who did he work for? CIA?’

‘No, higher agency.’

‘State Department, White House?’ Glass was avoiding eye contact.

‘A golf club in Virginia.’

Glass froze and stared at Mr. Grey. ‘Stanton was Lodge?’ he asked in a strained whisper.

Mr. Grey stepped closer. ‘He was the chairman, past fifteen years. And he was a patriot, a man who loved his country. Until he was murdered - by people more interested in money than the good of their country.’

Glass was horrified. ‘No, that can’t be right.’

‘He was a private man, he kept a low profile.’ Grey took another small step.

Glass squinted into the stranger’s cold eyes. ‘Who ... who sent you?’

‘I’m going to ask the questions. And the answers will determine how much pain you feel.’

Glass dropped his towel and rushed the slim man in front of him.

* * *

Johno walked into Beesely’s office at midnight. ‘Grey just called, got some names and leads. He apologies for not making a thorough interrogation, he was interrupted by room service.’

‘And the man, what’s his name -’

‘Glass. Grey decorated the hotel room with his fucking entrails, it’s on CNN already. Room service boy went out the window, twelve floors down to the road. Splat!’

Beesely sat back. ‘Guess Mr. Grey had some anger to work out,’ he quietly commented. ‘Any useful intel?’

‘Drugs being put together in Arizona, tests going on in six hospitals in Mississippi. Got some names, he’s going after them.’

Disappointed, Beesely said, ‘After what happened to this Glass fella they will all go to ground. Mr. Grey has lost perspective.’

‘He said to ask you if you wanted a puppy.’

Beesely frowned. 'Puppy? Is it some sort of code?'

'No. Stanton's daughter text's him most every day, asking about her father. Family is trying to find homes for some puppies.'

'I had forgotten. One of his daughters died in a car wreck, they adopted the baby. Girl must be ten or so by now. She's the grand-daughter.' Dame Helen was wheeled in by her husband, Mike, Beesely standing.

'Hello Mike.'

'Mister Beesely.' He forced a formal smile.

'I've made some calls,' Dame Helen began. 'We have some assets in the US that the Americans don't know about.'

'They think you are still in charge?' Beesely asked.

'I *am* still in charge - sick leave!' she barked. 'Remember?'

'Yes, sorry my dear. No need to bite.'

'They're awaiting orders,' she offered, a degree calmer.

'Send some to Arizona, some to Mississippi.'

She nodded. 'Anything new?'

Beesely glanced at Johnno and then at Mike. 'Well, we caught up with one of the men in New York.'

'And?'

'He talked before he died,' Beesely responded.

She shook her head. 'I don't need to know the details. I'm going to call it a day, I hurt all over.'

'We can get doctors in here for you,' Beesely offered. 'We have some always here -'

'They've already seen me. I just need some pain killers and a good night's sleep.'

'Of course. Anything you need, let us know.'

Mike wheeled her out. 'Rooms are fabulous,' she called from the corridor. Beesely slumped.

‘You look like shit,’ Johno said as he sat on the side of the desk.

‘Camp bed,’ Beesely ordered. ‘Check the perimeter, then lock us in.’ He lifted his head. ‘And you sleep –’ he waved his hand. ‘- *way* over there someplace.’

With a smirk Johno walked out, MP5 slung over a shoulder.

In the great hall Johno came across the ‘old dogs’ and the rest of the ex-SAS team. ‘OK, everyone, front and centre!’ He clapped his hands. ‘C’mon, roll-call.’

They assembled, men coming through the large wooden doors from the courtyard and drawbridge, also out from the castle reception area, boots echoing across the cobbles in the courtyard.

‘Kev? What the fuck *you* doing on stag?’ Johno shouted.

Kev grinned. ‘Last time I got a nick I got a quarter million. Hoping for something a wee bit more serious this time.’

Johno stepped up to him. ‘Are you completely fucking mad?’ His words echoed around the cavernous room.

‘It was just a nick,’ Kev insisted. ‘Doctor says I’m fine for guard duty!’

Johno shook his head. ‘Jesus.’ He stepped back and surveyed the troops and guards. ‘OK, new roof position manned?’

‘Yes, Boss. Four up there.’

‘Stairwell?’

‘Six on the stairs, Boss.’ They raised their hands.

‘Those new firing positions, the arrow slits?’

‘All manned with sniper rifles.’

‘Any fifty cal’s inside?’

They glanced at each other. A guard raised a hand. ‘There are two in the lower bunker, in reserve.’

‘OK, they’re not much use here anyway. Hands up courtyard squad.’

Six troopers raised their hands. Johnno moved along them and back, noting faces.

‘OK, great hall gang?’

The ‘old dogs’ raised their hands, along with six guards.

‘Reaction force?’

‘Eight troopers in the courtyard, two bullet-proof Range Rovers,’ Kev stated.

‘OK, everyone got spare ammo?’ They had. ‘Everyone got food and drink?’

They pointed to a corner of the great hall. Two vending machines had been placed there, several water containers underneath.

‘OK, good.’

‘What kinda trouble we expecting?’ Kev asked.

‘Round two, same idiots.’

Troopers glanced at each other. ‘They won’t get within five miles!’ Kev insisted. ‘Not even on a red tractor!’ A few laughs and rude comments shot around the room.

‘Then I’ll sleep well knowing that *you* are on guard. To your stations, people!’ Johnno ordered.

A shot rang out, coming from the direction of the lake.

‘Heads up!’ Johnno ordered. ‘Form squads.’

The courtyard and great hall squads charged through the courtyard and to the edge of the drawbridge, a roar of boots echoing on the cobblestones.

Johnno raised his phone. ‘All outside lights on!’

Another two shots rang out, clearly fifty calibre rounds; K2 agents firing outwards.

‘Report!’ Johnno shouted into his phone.

‘Diver in lake! He has been shot!’

‘Cease fire!’ Johnno shouted into his phone. ‘Cliff top! Report.’

‘Cliff top here. Single diver, hit three times.’

‘Any movement?’

‘No.’

‘Hold your fire. Lakeside units, grab the body.’

They waited several minutes.

‘Herr Johnno?’ burst from the phone.

‘Here, go ahead.’

‘This body is weeks old.’

Johnno raised his phone. ‘Stand down, dead body in the lake, old one.’ Groans echoed around the courtyard. ‘Back to normal alert stations. Cliff top, well done. Stay sharp.’ He turned. ‘Back inside.’

He made his way quickly to the guest quarters, knocking first on Susan’s door. ‘Susan, Patrick, you awake?’ he whispered, an ear to the door.

The door opened, Susan still dressed as before. ‘Just how the hell do you expect us to sleep with that bloody artillery barrage going on?’

‘Sorry. Dead body floating in the lake, boys thought it was an intruder.’

‘What were they firing?’ Patrick keenly asked.

‘Fifty calibre.’

Patrick’s eyebrows shot up. ‘Jesus, talk about overkill!’

Johnno shrugged. ‘They’re accurate to a mile. Nothing gets near this place. Sorry again.’

Dame Helen came down the corridor from the lift, wheeled by Mike. ‘What was the excitement?’

‘Body in the lake from the last episode. Boys don’t take any chances. Sorry if it startled you.’

‘I’m going to hit the painkillers and get to bed. You’ll need a bomb to wake me.’

Johnno offered her a look mock surprise. ‘Don’t go saying that, not around here.’

‘Boys trigger happy?’ Beesely asked, meeting Johnno on the command centre walkway.

‘Nah, not really. Body in the water would look just like a diver. I’d have shot at it.’ He yawned, leaning on the wooden rail.

‘Perimeter?’

‘All tight as fuck. Nothing, and no one, getting in here. Four times stronger than last time.’

‘Don’t go kipping in here, we don’t want a riot.’ Beesely winked, turned and closed his office door.

Otto approached. ‘Photocopy room is ready. Quiet and, as you say, *cosy*.’

‘Sound proof?’ Johnno asked, a wink and a grin.

‘Thick door, yes. Camp bed on the floor.’

‘We seem to have a full complement of staff?’ Johnno said as he straightened and surveyed the busy command centre.

‘After the last attack many complained, especially the women and the junior grades.’ Johnno shot Otto a questioning look, Otto explaining, ‘They want to stand and fight, not go home.’ Johnno offered Otto a puzzled look. Otto suggested, ‘Swiss pride and stubbornness.’

Johnno straightened. ‘I’m not that tired, I’ll probably roam about a bit. Inspire the troops.’

‘Your Admiral Nelson did this, I believe. Before a battle.’

Johnno put a hand inside his shirt, one behind his back, tipped up his nose and walked out trying to look dignified.

Otto quietly added, ‘But *he* ... was killed.’

* * *

The Gypsy’s dogs were a problem; close approach of the camp on the Church Fenton village green would be

hindered by their warning barks. The dogs would have to be dealt with first.

Downwind, and across the pond, three stealthy black figures crept through the bushes inch by inch. Six night-sights focused on the camp and the dogs, the agent's whispered observations relayed by satellite link to the attack group. In total, half a million pounds worth of electronics now focused on the Gypsy camp and their six caravans.

A cottage for rent on the edge of the green had been hurriedly leased that day, agents entering from the rear and taking up station at dusk. Real-time infrared cameras now focused on the green and the three roads accessing it. Three hundred yards along each road, nestled into bushes, expensive cameras watched the roads, satellite relays feeding their images back to Broadlands.

'Group one, you are clear.'

'Roger.'

A window in the cottage was gently coaxed up an inch, a silencer peeking out. Across the pond the first man released safety with a 'click'. The second man knelt, an elbow on his knee, sniper-rifle tight into his shoulder. Three dogs, so three shots would be required, timed to the exact same instant.

'All stations report.'

'Cottage One, clear. Ready.'

'Mobile One. Ready.'

'Mobile Two. Ready.'

'Mobile Three, area clear.'

'On my mark, fire on three. Standby. One ... two ... three.'

Three gentle cracks, no barking.

They waited a full four minutes; pitch blackness, a gentle breeze, the smell of summer meadows, an aircraft high overhead somewhere, a dog barking in the distance.

‘Mobiles withdraw.’

The two snipers on the green slowly withdrew, inch by inch, eight minutes to reach the path before running softly into a lane. They ran across a field, some two hundred yards, another hundred yards of lane and then into the back of a waiting van.

‘SAS go!’

The four ex-troopers moved from a lane and onto the common, black fatigues, balaclava masks, sacking over their boots. They moved silently across the road, slowly approaching the camp, splitting into two groups of two. On the grass they stepped slowly, each laboured stride taking four seconds to complete, their boots muffled by the sacking.

At the first dead dog they reached down and placed it into a sack, cutting the rope that had tied it to a caravan leg, backing up slowly. Two minutes later and the first two men were back in the lane, closely followed by the next two men. The last trooper silently opened the bottle he carried and poured the contents over the grass where each dog had died, the chemical eating away the blood and leaving no trace.

He backed up, joining his colleagues three minutes later. From the lane they walked softly a hundred yards, cut across a field and joined the road some two hundred yards further on, a van waiting. They clambered in, and waited.

Thirty minutes later the observers checked the cameras and reported in. All was quiet. Next came the tricky bit.

2

Special Agent Bambitou ducked under the yellow police tape and straightened his six foot four frame, two of his

colleagues quickly following him, all now dressed in loosely fitting blue FBI waistcoats over their suits.

The lead detective glanced up at the large black man approaching. 'Mr. Bambitou.'

'Mister Dawson.'

'*Detective Dawson.*'

'*Special Agent Bambitou.*'

They smiled.

'What we got, Mick?' Bambitou asked. 'I got a *special* call to be here -' he checked his watch. '- at this lovely hour.'

'Yeah, I got a special *causal enquiry* from way up high about this guy.'

'Rumour is CIA,' Bambitou whispered.

Dawson lifted his eyebrows in mock surprise. 'You don't say?'

'Is it as bad as they say?'

'Oh yeah, hold onto your lunch. Someone had a score to settle, sliced and diced. Signs of torture first.'

'So, CIA man was made to talk,' Bambitou muttered.

'Yeah, but about what?'

'About stuff we don't need to know, I'm guessing. What's the connection with room service?'

'No police record, college lad, local. Probably walked in on the interrogation, maybe heard a scream.'

'And got thrown out the window for his troubles.' Bambitou sighed. 'Has anyone from -' he pointed up. '- above turned up?'

Detective Dawson tipped his head towards the other end of the corridor. Two men in suits were talking into their mobile phones.

Bambitou studied them, sighing. 'Some days I love this job.' His phone rang as the two nondescript men in suits walked towards him. 'Bambitou. Yes, Bob?' He listened, his features sullen. He sighed loudly. 'OK, copy

to me.’ He closed his flip phone as the two men stepped level.

‘Special Agent Bambitou,’ the first man coldly stated.

Bambitou tipped his head to both men in sequence. ‘VIPOUO-1, VIPOUO-2.’

They both offered unfriendly stares. ‘Excuse me?’

‘VIPOUO - VIP of unknown origins.’

The two men forced a quick smile then displayed ID badges from the Department of Defense. ‘This is a sensitive matter, and one for which we shall expect close co-operation.’

‘Good,’ Bambitou loudly enthused, the two men slightly startled. ‘I do love co-operation.’ The two DOD men glanced at each other. ‘Perhaps we can start with the *five hundred thousand* dollars paid into this gentleman’s bank account from a known Russian gangster - upon his return from Euro-Disney.’

The two DOD men glanced at each other again, clearly concerned, but also confused.

‘You see, distinguished visitors, the FBI is now going to proceed along the lines that this ... *gentleman* was a dirty little bag of shit, up to no good.’

The two DOD men pushed past and left.

Detective Dawson stepped closer, watching them go. ‘Must have been something you said.’

A dirty war

1

Beesely was already awake when the arrival of Elle Rosen and 'superior' had been announced. They were coming from the airport under heavy escort.

He stood as Elle stepped into his office some fifteen minutes later. 'Elle, welcome,' he said with a forced, tired smile.

'Sir Morris, hello again.' They shook. 'And you met my associate before.' Elle moved aside and allowed in the same man who had attended previously. They shook.

Sounding tired and concerned, Beesely said, 'Please, come in, have a seat. Tea and coffee is fresh, just arrived. Food?'

'I ate on the plane,' the second man said with a quick flat smile, looking jet-lagged. The two Israelis sat, Beesely pouring out three coffees.

'What do I call you?' Beesely asked as he sat.

'Mosh,' will do, the older man answered.

Elle put down his coffee. 'So, Beesely, some day you just call to say 'hi' eh?'

Beesely forced out a long hard sigh. 'Apologies, gentlemen. To quote the man from, what is it, Zohar Chemicals - *we have a lot of problems.*'

Mosh leant forwards. 'He has refused to come back, I understand.'

Beesely made a face. 'Yes, I suppose he would. He arrived here in the middle of a small war.'

'And now you seem to be on alert?' Elle enquired, making it seem a complaint.

'Yes, another crisis. But don't worry, no one getting near this place now.'

‘Not least because of a squadron of American Apaches!’ Mosh pointedly suggested.

‘They do have the ... *deterrent* effect, don’t they?’

‘Did you get to the bottom of the attack?’ Elle asked.

Beesely eased back. ‘Yes. CIA.’

The visitors both shot upright. ‘What?’ they asked at the same time.

‘Not official CIA action, of course. Rogue element.’

‘Why did they want you dead?’ Mosh asked, clearly stunned.

‘Same reason you are here today, I’m afraid. Well, tonight. It was all part of the same thing.’ Beesely made direct eye contact with Mosh. ‘I trust you are familiar with Project Darwin?’

‘What?’ Mosh forced out in a strained whisper, although it was clearly no request for clarification.

‘It seems that they have finished the project. Oh, and looks as if they may have sold it to the Russians.’

Mosh jumped up. ‘Are you crazy?’

Beesely stood. ‘Mosh, please. Have a seat.’

Mosh glanced at Elle and slowly sat.

‘Project Darwin?’ Elle repeated, wide-eyed.

‘Does he not know?’ Beesely asked. Mosh shook his head. Beesely addressed Elle directly. ‘Germ warfare. Very nasty, very dangerous germ warfare.’

Mosh rubbed his face. ‘You can tell him the truth.’

Beesely sipped his coffee as he faced Elle. ‘Signature DNA weapon. It’s a virus, coded to attack people with certain DNA characteristics, such as Afro-Caribbeans with the Sickle Cell trait.’

‘That’s terrible,’ Elle admitted, clearly confused. ‘But what does it have to do with a threat to Israel?’

Beesely explained, ‘The virus DNA trigger can be set to Arabs, or any other group. We think that’s why Boris Luchenkov was trying to buy it –’

‘Trying to buy it?’ Mosh interrupted. ‘He does not have it yet?’

‘We don’t know. We do know that the men involved were paid, and not just for attacking me. They received five hundred million dollars. Don’t need that to send mercenaries my way, a tenth would do.’

‘So he may have it,’ Mosh considered, his head lowered.

‘We’re investigating.’

Elle had been thinking. ‘What would the Russians want with it?’

‘Chechnya,’ Mosh informed his subordinate.

‘Problem is,’ Beesely quietly began, ‘if the Russians release the virus, and it kills Chechen Muslims, then it keeps going into the Middle East attacking anyone who has the relevant genes, which is where you come in. Whether you like it or not, you are closely linked, genetically, to your Arab neighbours. Not to mention geographically.’

‘So this virus spreads across the Middle East,’ Elle said, thinking out loud.

‘And probably takes a number of your people with it,’ Beesely coldly stated. ‘That’s assuming that it does not mutate and just kill all of us.’

‘How could they be so stupid?’ Mosh angrily asked of himself, barely above a whisper.

‘Money, in part at least,’ Beesely stated. ‘Five hundred million that we know about, possibly a lot more. Oh, we pinched that back, by the way. Plus ... plus there may be those in the CIA happy to see the virus spread around the Middle East, thin out the population a bit. Gives them plausible deniability if the Russians release it - they can always say that it was a Russian-made virus. The one thing in their favour is time, the virus would not be quick.’

‘Do you know who is behind it?’ Mosh asked, now looking up.

‘Oliver Stanton was killed by his number two, Henry O’Sullivan. Don’t know who else was involved from the top end, but we are actively pursuing the little people.’

Mosh nodded. ‘What do you need from us?’

‘Assets inside the States that the Yanks don’t know about, plus access to any Jewish-controlled investment companies.’

‘Investment companies?’ Mosh repeated, a slight frown forming.

‘I have an idea. I’m planning on taking control of a few companies involved in this research and will need plenty of investment capital.’

‘And this capital, it will not be lost?’ Mosh enquired.

‘No, invested in top one hundred US stocks. No risk, maybe some short term ... er ... what did Otto say ... *volatility*. What I need is to tell your investment people in the States when to buy and sell, and when to put out rumours. And that will need to be carefully co-ordinated.’

‘And then, you can be sure that you will stop them?’ Elle eagerly asked.

‘No.’

Elle sat back, looking disappointed.

Beesely added, ‘I can do the best I can until they kill me and my people. I can’t risk going public with this, the fall-out would be just as bad as if they used the damn thing. The Arab world would unite against us. You, gentlemen, need to keep this under your hats.’ Beesely sipped his coffee. ‘I’ll send you ten million towards the use of your assets in the States.’

Mosh leant forwards and eased up to go. ‘Mister Beesely, our people do not do what they do for money.’

Beesely also now stood, walking around the desk.

Mosh took his hand. 'Keep your money. Use it for what you need to do.' He held Beesely's hand with both of his. Softly he promised, 'Tomorrow night we will be ready to make some investments - Elle will remain and help here.'

Beesely offered him a pained expression. 'Send someone who looks and sounds ... less *Israeli*. This is Switzerland, after all, and K2 is full of big strapping Aryans.'

Mosh seemed momentarily surprised, then his features softened. 'I know what you mean. We will send some French investment managers.'

'Sorry,' Beesely quietly offered.

'It is not your fault, Mister Beesely,' Mosh quietly and forcefully insisted, heaving a deep sigh. 'Do not worry about it.'

Elle shook his hand. 'Shalom. Oh, think of a password phrase for your people to identify themselves to our people and vice versa.'

Beesely smiled. 'Question. Who is on the red tractor? Answer: Alison Star.'

Elle frowned as he walked out.

* * *

Gypsy's did not, as a rule, have their vehicles stolen out from under them at night. But if they had witnessed the method used they might have been impressed by the ingenuity, if not the audacity.

The first vehicle was a transit van, thankfully for the K2 men empty in the rear and parked on the edge of the green, the easiest of the vehicles to access. Four long metal poles were placed underneath it, each padded with rubber. Eight men, four ex-troopers and four K2 agents,

now lifted in unison, a slight creak from the vehicle's chassis.

Trying hard not to laugh they plodded slowly forwards, each man straining with the weight. After fifty yards they gently laid down the vehicle, at the start of the lane and next to the rented cottage. The metal poles were removed to the rear of the cottage, the driver's window circumscribed by a glasscutter. With the door now open an agent leant in and released the handbrake, the vehicle pushed silently along the lane and destined for an isolated quarry lake some twenty miles away.

The door to an open-topped truck turned out to be unlocked, the handbrake released. With a gentle push it edged into the pond, inch by inch and with no splashes, until its engine was now half submerged. With wet feet the agents withdrew. At the edge of the green they stopped dead and crouched, a caravan door opening.

The man emerging walked briskly to the pond's edge and unzipped, beginning his midnight constitutional before turning his head and noticing the truck. A silenced shot through the neck prevented him from crying out.

'Action! Action!' burst over the earpiece radios.

Two agents ran forwards, grabbing the body by the arms and dragging it towards the road.

'Clean up detail forwards!'

Two troopers grabbed the legs of the body, four men now carrying it down the lane. At the rear of the cottage they stopped, shoving it quickly into a body bag.

Now there was a blood trail. And blood on agents.

The cottage had been rented by phone and using false identities, but this was still a concern. With the body bag dosed in water it was carried through the lane and to a van, the van leaving immediately.

In the lane the last of the chemical blood neutraliser was spread on the tarmac. It covered an area of perhaps

twenty yards, back towards the green. The reserve bottles at Broadlands were ordered as the majority of agents and staff got ordered out of the rented house. They moved silently down the lane, across the field and to the main road, jumping into vans that pulled off quietly without their lights on.

The senior guard stepped out of the rear of the rented cottage and into the lane, stood assessing the scene with hands on hips. He checked his watch. Three hours of darkness remained, but the first of the local farmers would be on the move an hour before that. With just two agents remaining he waited for the chemicals, observing the caravans from a window. The camp remained silent.

Twenty minutes later the chemicals were being spread down the lane, followed by water thinning it out. At the point where the man had been shot a liberal amount was spread around, then back along the trail. Finally, buckets of watered-down bleach swamped the rear of the rented cottage, and the lane as far as the green.

Two hours remained before dawn, two hours for it evaporate on this warm night. And the bleach would throw off any trail for police dogs to follow. As dawn started to break the cameras in the hedges were retrieved, the cottage cleared and wiped down.

The van used to transport the body was now on its way to Dover, headed for Zug with false number plates. The contaminated clothes of all the men involved were burning at Broadlands, together with webbing and boots, all now thoroughly ablaze on the gravel driveway. The men had washed thoroughly, chemicals used under their fingernails and in their hair, fresh clothes placed on.

At dawn an anonymous call had been made to the police, someone pretending to be a local resident complaining about the truck in the pond. Thirty minutes later the Gypsy's were awake. And not happy.

Shouts had roused those locals whose houses and cottages faced the green. More complaints, genuine ones, reached the police. Thirty minutes later, a full hour after the first call, a patrol car arrived.

The single remaining Gypsy vehicle was now being employed to try and tow the lorry from the pond, which seemed firmly stuck in the mud and not co-operating. The police officers tried hard not to smile as they approached.

‘They stole our dogs!’ a woman complained, stood in a nightdress with arms folded.

‘Stole your dogs, madam?’ the first officer repeated.

‘The villagers,’ she pressed.

The officer’s eyes widened. ‘The villagers? Stole those mangy mutts we saw yesterday, the one’s you said you’d set on us? Those mangy mutts?’

‘And a van!’ she added.

‘And was it ... *your* van?’ the second officer asked.

She gave them a colourful and imaginative mouthful before storming off. Getting nowhere with the Gypsies, the officers accepted tea and toast from a villager, a retired police officer, before heading back.

2

‘Did you see that?’ the first American patrol officer asked, jerking upright in his seat.

His partner in the squad car snapped his head around. ‘No, what?’

‘Looked like a kid driving that hire Lexus.’ He started the patrol car, eased out onto the Jersey highway and put on his lights. A minute later they had closed the gap.

‘Christ, that kid can barely see over the wheel!’

‘That kid is bald!’

The Lexus slowed, indicated and pulled over onto a grass verge, both sides of this road heavily wooded. The

officers gathered their equipment and ticket-pads and stepped out. Herr Mole wound down the window and looked up through his thick glasses as the officer peered in.

‘Oh,’ the officer stumbled. Then he noticed the cushions that Mole now sat on.

‘Uh, is this your vehicle, sir?’

‘No.’

The officer frowned slightly. ‘Did you hire it?’

‘Yah. At zer airport.’

‘Do ... you ... have ... some ... identification?’ the officer asked, his words slow and carefully pronounced.

Herr Mole showed the officer his passport. The man thumbed through it lazily, realising he was wasting his time. ‘Where ... are ... you ... going?’

‘Johnz-townz.’

The officer pointed ahead, before noticing a large sign for Johnstown. He handed back Mole’s passport. ‘Thank you, sir.’ He rolled his eyes and walked back to his patrol car.

* * *

A new dawn over the hills greeted Johnno at the drawbridge. He took a drag as a Range Rover pulled up, then threw away the cigarette stub. The reaction squad jumped down, stretching. ‘Anything?’ he quietly asked.

‘Nope, not a sausage,’ the first trooper said.

‘You sound disappointed.’

‘Kev got a quarter million.’

‘Don’t you start, we don’t pay out when you get killed!’ Johnno pointed out. The squad assembled. ‘Right,’ Johnno began, summoning some energy. ‘Food, shower, kit back on, eight hours sleep - in your kit, weapons never more than arms distance.’

‘OK, Boss,’ they yawned.

‘Where’s the bird on the tractor?’ a trooper sarcastically called.

‘In the Maldives on a bloody photo shoot,’ Johnno informed them.

‘And here you are, just us to look at.’ They laughed.

‘Fuck ... right ... off!’

* * *

Otto appeared in the doorway to Beesely’s office. ‘Yes?’

‘Come, come. Sit.’

Otto sat, looking as fresh and as immaculate as normal.

‘Right, there are some French investment managers on their way here -’

‘French?’

Beesely glanced at the doorway. ‘Mossad,’ he whispered. Then louder, ‘They are going to help with my master plan.’

Otto squinted, concerned. ‘Master ... plan?’

‘I am taking a leaf out of Gunter’s book!’

Otto stopped dead and mocked surprise. ‘I hope not.’

‘Not everything he did was ... you know, unpleasant. Do we have sleeper agents in pharmaceutical companies around the world?’

‘Some, yes.’

Beesely tapped the table. ‘I want a list of companies. I also want a room set up somewhere for command and control of investment operations.’

Otto’s brow slowly knitted. ‘What do you have planned?’

‘We are going to buy controlling shares in drug companies, and biological research companies and the like.’

‘Why?’ Otto pressed.

‘So that we can dictate what projects they work on, of course. I have the Jewish investment community on board, probably a few others. Oh, get hold of the Society, tell them *big ... big ... big* investment opportunity and to send some representatives, we need to co-ordinate carefully and move quickly. And you, my boy, need to be fresh when the US markets open, which is when?’

‘About 5pm our time,’ Otto stated as he stood. ‘With all these groups trading in a co-ordinated fashion the American Securities Exchange may investigate us.’

‘Which is why we need to trade on that ... whatsit small thing?’

‘Public trading area.’

‘And carefully. Thankfully, my man Otto is a genius at these things.’ Otto cracked a smile. ‘No bullets today, Otto. We are fighting the Americans the one way that they will respect. With money!’

War without bullets

1

Susan and Patrick wheeled in Dame Helen as Otto walked out, exchanging greetings.

Beesely stood up to welcome them. 'How did you sleep?'

'Fine,' Susan replied. 'Like a five star hotel up there, room service and all!'

'Good. Helen, you OK?'

'Fine, but not so easy to sleep with the leg. When I turn over it wakes me.'

'Anything you need?'

'No,' Dame Helen firmly answered. 'We've had breakfast and now we're ready to press on. No *visitors* during the night?'

'No live ones, at least. Sorry about the noise, boys spotted a dead body in the water and thought it a diver, shot it up.'

'What are those things in the ceilings everywhere?' Susan asked, wheeling Dame Helen nearer to the white boards.

'They detect nerve gas or chemical weapons,' Beesely informed them.

Patrick closed in on his wife. 'You had to ask!'

'Any news?' Dame Helen asked without looking around.

'Cross Mr. Glass off the list. No piece of him left bigger than would fit in a shoe box.'

Patrick ran a red line through his name, Dame Helen glancing over her shoulder, a reproachful glare at Beesely.

'Anyway,' Beesely called, 'big show kicks off around 5pm.'

‘Big show?’ Susan asked, concerned.

‘We’re going to screw with the Dow Jones,’ he proudly proclaimed. Dame Helen wheeled herself around, a questioning look, Beesely announcing, ‘We are going to be fighting with money and sleight of hand today, not bullets. Have a rest before the big show, it will go on until ... well, eight hours after 5pm I guess.’

‘I have friends in the City,’ Dame Helen offered. ‘Large UK finance houses sometimes get tip-offs from us.’

‘Tut ... tut ... tut. You’re as bad as K2. But warn them something big, big, big is going down later. Are they any good at spreading rumours, perchance?’

She glanced at Susan and Patrick. ‘You might think that, I could not possibly comment. Besides, these two may arrest us.’

Susan stepped to the desk. ‘New washing machine, conservatory, new car,’ she counted out on her fingers.

Beesely smiled, turning to make direct eye contact with Dame Helen. ‘I doubled the amount in that secret retirement fund of yours. It’s for Susan and the family.’

Dame Helen nodded. ‘We need to be very careful. Met’ cops with large amounts of cash would attract attention.’ She glanced at Beesely from under her eyebrows then addressed Susan. ‘But we have a way of you *winning* it in a competition.’

Beesely laughed as several large TV sets were wheeled in and lined up. ‘What are these for?’ he asked.

‘They will have real time information about American stocks, sir.’

‘Ah, excellent. We can watch the show from here.’

‘Beesely,’ Dame Helen called. ‘I’ve been doing some thinking, made some calls last night.’

‘Oh?’ He walked around and sat on the edge of the desk.

She continued, 'As far as I know any complex Signature DNA virus cannot, yet, be released into the air, it has to be direct - close quarters or blood to blood. So, how are they going to infect a large population?'

'Good point, unless they have found a way to spray it around.'

'I'm reasonably sure they can't. This Sickle Cell sample test - it's a series of big needles. So how do you inject a population without them knowing about it?'

'Jabs!' Susan suggested.

'What?' Beesely asked, turning to her.

'Yes, she's right,' Dame Helen agreed. 'W.H.O!'

'W.H.O?' Beesely repeated, a slight frown. 'World Health Organization?'

'Tamper with their jabs,' Dame Helen suggested. 'They spend a lot of time in the Middle East giving kids jabs. And where do the jabs come from?'

It was a leading question, Beesely straightening. 'UN, New York, bought in bulk from Western pharmaceutical companies.' He walked around his desk and tapped the phone. 'I want the scientists to factor in the World Health Organization, assuming that batches of immunisation jabs might be tainted. I want to know how and where they are produced, where they go, who ships them and how. And quickly.'

'Sir,' buzzed from his phone. 'A woman visitor just slapped Herr Johnno in the courtyard.'

'Why do people say that like they are surprised?' he asked the room in general and no one in particular. He pressed a button. 'Are these visitors French Investment Managers perchance?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Send them down here to me.' He pressed END and sat back.

'Who are they?' Dame Helen asked.

‘The cavalry,’ Beesely announced with a broad smile. Then directly at Dame Helen, ‘International Congress.’ He winked.

‘Oh,’ she said.

Two attractive ladies in smart blue suits walked in, followed by two male colleagues.

‘Welcome. Please, do come in.’ Beesely gestured towards seats then pressed his phone. ‘Fresh tea, French coffee and bagels.’

They pulled up seats as Johnno wandered in, immediately scowled at by the ladies, shot dirty looks by the men. Johnno smiled a confident, flirty smile down at the woman who had just slapped him.

‘I see you have met my gardener,’ Beesely said, tipping his head towards Johnno. ‘He drives the tractor.’

‘Gardener?’ the woman repeated in a thick French accent, studying Johnno. ‘Pah!’ she spat out. Susan closed in and folded her arms, staring at Johnno.

Johnno gave the attractive French lady a deliberate Gallic shrug, grinning. ‘What? All I said was - *yeah baby*.’

Faster than anyone would have anticipated the French lady had his wrist from her seated position, standing quickly, Johnno over the desk and a moment later, his face down into Beesely’s papers.

From where he sat Beesely casually eased forwards, put one hand on the desk, the other hand on top, lowered his head and put his chin on his hands, his face close to Johnno’s. ‘Does that hurt?’ he enquired in a whisper.

‘Yeah,’ Johnno coughed out in a forced whisper.

‘Is that your bad shoulder, or the good one?’

‘The bad one,’ he strained to get out.

Otto walked in, stood with his hands clasped behind his back.

Beesely added, ‘So, it must hurt a tad then?’

‘Yeah, some help would be appreciated.’

‘Really?’ Beesely sat upright. ‘He wants some help. Let’s vote on it. Patrick?’ No response. ‘Susan?’ No response. ‘Helen?’ Nothing. ‘Otto?’

‘I think he looks comfortable,’ Otto suggested.

Thomas walked in and stood next to Beesely. The situation was explained to him, Thomas voting in favour of Johnno.

‘It would appear Thomas wants us to help you. And it would not be seemly for you to struggle against a mere slip of a girl with him watching.’

Johnno made eye contact with Thomas, then eased up and straightened. The woman tried her best to twist his arm, using all of her strength, but Johnno just smiled back at her. He eased his arm up and righted it, despite her best efforts. Shocked, she let go and stood back.

Beesely explained, ‘Young lady, he could kill you with a single blow - he is playing with you. Johnno, sit.’

‘Johnno?’ the lady repeated, shocked. Her colleagues glanced at each other.

‘Yes, young lady. Johnno, be so kind as to take off your shirt, please.’

Johnno shrugged before unbuttoning his shirt, easing it off as he maintained eye contact with the woman who had pinned him down. Dame Helen winced, as did Patrick, Susan straightening and grimacing. The French were equally shocked.

‘OK, Johnno, let’s not put our guests off their lunch.’

Johnno started to dress as Thomas, impressed, stood next to him with his arms folded.

Beesely addressed the French delegation. ‘Welcome to Schloss Diane and K2.’ He repeated it in French.

‘Your security is quite the surprise,’ the same woman said, heavily accented.

‘We have a lot of problems, to quote a well used phrase.’ He gestured towards Otto. ‘This is Herr Otto, my

number two and expert banker and stock trader professional.’ They nodded towards him. Turning the opposite way he gestured towards Dame Helen, ‘This is Dame Helen, Director of British Intelligence.’ That shocked them. Finally, gesturing towards Susan and Patrick, he said, ‘And these are part of the ... personal bodyguard for Dame Helen - English Special Branch!’

Fresh tea and coffee was brought in, interrupting proceedings.

Beesely turned to Otto. ‘Do we have a trading area set up?’

‘Yes, there is a trading link in the office block. It is fully equipped.’

‘Good, good.’ He returned to the French. ‘Do you know why you are here?’

‘Yes,’ came collectively back.

‘And you have links set up to the States?’ They nodded. ‘We will start around 5pm Central European Time. Before then, start to slowly off-load shares in the companies we are interested in, small deals and very discreet.’ He made eye contact with Otto. ‘*Our* bank as well, and our ... *friends*. Bet on the drug stocks falling with those –’ he glanced at his notes, squinting. ‘- stock options. ‘Puts’?’

The French took notes before starting on their coffee and bagels.

‘Right,’ Beesely began as everyone else sat. ‘This is the plan, although all of it cannot be discussed, nor some of the reasons behind it.’

He addressed the French directly. ‘If you have any questions or doubts, you will have to talk to those who requested your presence here. OK, we are going to be *off-loading* drug stocks, plus stock in those companies that we are interested in. Then we are going to put out rumours

about over-stocked drugs and a price crash, plus some investigations into various drug trials.

‘Then, we are going to try and force down the Dow Jones through problems with the drug sector. After which, when we are ready, we will reverse strongly - using the small public trading area - and try and take them by surprise, collecting as many shares as we can in certain companies. And it should all be great fun. Any questions?’

The French seemed confident.

‘OK, Herr Otto will take you to your office. Please, ask for anything you need.’ Beesely stood as the French placed down their half-drunk coffees and followed Otto out.

‘Sir,’ buzzed from his phone.

‘Yes?’

‘There are three representatives from the Society here.’

‘Send them to Otto in the stock trading room.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I should call the Prime Minister,’ Dame Helen suggested. ‘If this gets out of hand there’ll be tough questions in the morning.’

‘Then perhaps,’ Beesely began, ‘we should wait until the morning before we tell him. He needs plausible deniability, as they say.’

She shrugged.

‘I’m still a bit confused,’ Susan said, grabbing a tea.

Johno eased up off the cabinet. ‘Simple really. We use our friends in low places to cause the stock market to crash, then we buy shares in the companies involved in the dodgy research, then we send our own people in to make sure they do as we say from now on.’

Beesely sat back and folded his arms. ‘Not as stupid as you look, are you?’

Johno took a biscuit. ‘Good job she got the bad arm.’

‘I know.’ Beesely turned to Susan. ‘He was shot in that shoulder, not so much feeling.’

‘I’ll remember that,’ she threatened.

Dame Helen wheeled herself closer. ‘You do realise, that with control of these companies and the supply chain, there’s no need to track down the bad guys. They can’t produce enough for it to be effective.’

Beesely took a breath and stopped smiling, ‘True. But, my dear Helen, you should have realised by now that K2 has a reputation to maintain. Screw with us, you die a horrible death. And besides, they killed a friend of mine - rammed another one off the road.’ He made strong eye contact. ‘So they pay.’

She turned away quickly and went back to the boards.

2

The TV screens flickered with alternating red and green squares, abbreviations of US public companies listed on the Dow Jones Index. Pre-opening trading did take place, those that controlled the markets, the ‘market makers’, marking down some stocks at a lower price before normal trading started. One screen detailed the index itself broken into five-minutes segments, a third would show a graph of movement.

All drug stocks had opened down, thanks to Beesely’s group selling on the European markets, and the start of the rumours. People were *off-loading*.

‘What is ‘the spread’?’ Beesely asked Otto.

‘It is the market maker’s commission, how they make money. You buy at ten dollars, sell back to them at eight dollars - the same as currency conversion at the airport. The two dollars is the spread. When the markets are volatile the spread increases.’

‘And before that you would sell options?’

‘Not really. If you are a market-maker then you would want to sell options when the markets are volatile, hoping they become less volatile. When the markets are volatile the options are more expensive than when things are quiet.’

‘Are we doing that today?’

‘No, this is a short-term exercise. We have taken large bets on the drug stocks falling, all around the world. We have also off-loaded much of our drug stocks with institutional dealers who do not suspect.’

‘Ah, outside the markets, yes?’

Otto nodded. ‘Yes, done yesterday, listed on the markets today.’

‘What’s that?’ Beesely asked, pointing at a screen.

‘It has opened down fifty points, drugs stocks tumbling.’ Otto took a closer look, running an expert eye over many figures.

Dame Helen wheeled herself closer, Susan and Patrick stuck to the boards, Mike staying with the children.

Otto turned. ‘We, and our partners, will not get the chance to off-load as much as we had hoped for. Someone has been greedy and bet heavily on a falling market. That probably worried the market-makers, so *they* are off-loading.’

Beesely pressed a button. ‘Tell all our people to off-load as best as they can.’

‘Yes, sir.’

He sat back and watched the boards. ‘Is it a big problem?’

‘No, the drug stocks were low recently, so keeping the stocks is not so bad. The aim is to get more than five percent in as many companies as we can, through stealth.’

The screens turned red, almost everything red.

‘Christ, they are *all* bleeding red!’ Beesely pointed out.

‘Large basket trades,’ Otto suggested.

‘Basket trades?’

‘When futures and options are traded, they relate to baskets of shares in the markets, in the proportions of the sizes of the companies. If you buy a *future*, you are buying all the underlying stocks in their size proportions. The option and future is simpler than buying all the stocks.’

‘Fascinating!’

‘It is all automated,’ Otto explained before he answered his phone. Putting it away he turned back to the screens. ‘We have arranged for some serious rumours to start in thirty minutes. Co-ordinating them will be ... impossible.’

Beesely pressed a button. ‘Tell all our people that rumours start in half an hour!’ He sipped his coffee.

Dame Helen turned. ‘I can’t predict when my lot let lose with the rumours. Could be anytime.’

Otto turned to her. ‘The British acted too quickly. They bet heavily before the fall.’

‘Does that help or hinder us?’ she asked.

‘It helps the second stage, not the first,’ Otto explained.

Fifteen minutes passed.

‘A lot of those are blue ones?’ Beesely queried.

‘Not drug stocks, they are down fifteen percent on average. But there is good trading in the oil stocks.’

‘What can we do about that?’ Beesely asked.

Otto turned and faced Dame Helen, his arms folded. ‘Rumours?’

‘Reuters,’ she said. ‘You have people?’

Otto nodded. He raised his phone, ‘I want Reuters to report ... Americans and UN agreed to treble, rather than double, Iraqi oil output.’

‘That will hurt,’ Dame Helen suggested, clearly worried.

‘Hurt who?’ Beesely asked.

‘Your friends in Reuters for one,’ she suggested. ‘And anyone not paying attention today.’

Beesely pressed a button. ‘Tell all our friends to expect a crash in oil.’

‘Dip ... in oil,’ Otto corrected.

They waited.

‘Christ, you see that?’ Dame Helen asked.

‘It is happening,’ Otto informed her.

Beesely walked up to a screen, watching the graph plummet. ‘How significant?’

‘Dow Jones just dipped seventy-five points in a moment. That is rare,’ Otto explained.

‘How long before the Yanks and the UN deny the rumours?’ Beesely asked.

‘Perhaps only a few hours,’ Otto suggested.

‘How can we know first?’ Beesely asked.

Otto gave it some thought. ‘Any unscheduled press announcement by the White House or the UN would be this news.’

Beesely walked back to his desk and pressed a button. ‘I want to be warned of any press conferences by the White House or the UN.’

Johno walked in. ‘Got the game on?’

‘It’s started,’ Beesely informed him without taking his eyes off the plummeting chart. He pointed at it.

‘Ouch. But are we winning?’ Johno enquired.

‘Yes,’ Otto flatly answered, studying the screens. ‘You know, I miss doing this.’

‘What?’ Johno asked. ‘Going off getting shot at, are we?’

Otto smiled back at him. ‘My life before ... it seems so different. So quiet.’

Patrick and Susan had closed in, watching the screens, mesmerized along with everyone else.

* * *

An hour later the Dow had fallen more than two hundred points.

‘Sir?’ buzzed from Beesely’s phone.

‘Yes?’

‘There is a joint statement from the White House and UN in ten minutes.’

‘Warn everyone that oil will recover.’

‘Yes, sir.’

He stood and approached Otto quickly. ‘How low are the drug stocks?’

‘They have lost eighteen percent, but slowing.’

‘OK, take profits on the down bets now.’ He rushed to his phone, as Otto raised his. Beesely pressed CALL. ‘Tell everyone that drug stocks will be slowing their rate of fall. And to be ready.’

‘It is happening much quicker than expected,’ Otto warned from across the room, phone to his ear.

‘What is? The reversal?’ Beesely enquired.

‘No, the whole thing,’ Otto explained. ‘I had hoped that the stocks would fall for more hours yet.’

‘Have they fallen enough to help us?’ Helen asked.

‘Yes, it is a good price, which was low to start with,’ Otto answered her.

Johno stepped forwards. ‘Can we now bet on the drug stocks rising?’

‘My next call, a matter of timing.’ He issued orders into the phone.

‘Getting it back up is always a matter of timing,’ Johno said directly toward Helen. She offered him a disapproving look and turned away.

The press conference was keenly watched, a complete denial. Oil stocks recovered quickly.

Beesely pressed a phone button. 'OK, tell everyone to buy drug stocks. Maximum effort.'

Johnno approached the white boards at the far end, away from the action. He glanced through aircraft passenger lists, stopping and frowning at one. He was about to walk away when he stopped and turned. 'Dame Helen? Do you mind?' he called over to her.

Susan turned, wheeling Helen across. Johnno held his finger on a passenger that flew back from the States with Mr. Glass and friends, in fact, in the seat behind them.

'Could be just someone with the same name,' she said, squinting.

'And if it isn't?' Johnno quietly pressed. She elevated her gaze, suddenly horrified. Johnno added, 'Adds a whole new dimension as to *who* rammed you off the road, and why!'

Susan looked at the name. 'Who is that?'

'The head of MI5.' Johnno turned. 'Beesely!' he shouted, Beesely and Otto spinning around. 'Someone with the same name as the head of MI5 is linked in!'

Dame Helen tapped Johnno's leg. 'Give me your phone.' He handed it over. 'This is Dame Helen, I want to connect to my office, to Willis.' She waited. 'Willis, find out quickly if Rawlins took a flight to the US last week.'

'Hold on,' Willis requested.

They waited, Dame Helen's hand trembling. Johnno reached down and held it, Helen looking up and making eye contact with him.

'Helen, you there?' Willis called.

'Yes,' she replied, her voice now breaking.

'Apparently he was supposed to be in Canada, family thing for a few days.'

'What day to what day?' she asked.

'Flew back in via New York last Wednesday, 15th July.'

She glanced at the board and burst into tears.

Beesely moved quickly. 'Susan, Patrick, take her to her room, get the doctor!' he ordered, grabbing Johnno's phone. 'Willis?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Not a word of this to anyone!' he barked. 'Understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

He hung up and walked briskly to his desk. Sitting, he tapped his own phone. 'Get me Rawlins, head of MI5, London.'

'What are doing?' Johnno complained. 'We should grab him!'

'Wait!' Beesely snapped, Otto moving closer so that he could listen in.

'Rawlins here.'

'This is Sir Morris Beesely.'

'How are you?' came a casual, rather unfriendly tone.

'Fine, fine.'

'And how can I help *you*, exactly?'

'You can shed some light on your movements last week. Canada, was it?'

Rawlins paused. 'Why would you be interested in my movements, Sir Morris?'

'Do you still like to play on-line gambling?'

Another pause. 'What are you getting at?'

'Seems that, unfortunately for you, some of the anonymous players you have been playing against are well known international terrorists and criminals.'

'You ... bastard!'

'Quite. Takes one to know one.'

Rawlins paused again. Softly, he asked, 'What are you after?'

'The truth. Because right now you are in the frame for murder.'

‘Murder? What are you saying?’ Rawlins shrieked.

‘You flew back from New York last week, 15th wasn’t it?’

‘Yes, connection from Quebec. What of it?’

‘The two men who sat in front of you –’

‘Yes, I knew them, they’re US Defense Department. What of it?’

‘*They* ... are the some of same chaps that rammed Dame Helen off the road, killing her daughter. You see where that leaves you, Mister Rawlins?’

Another long pause. ‘I was NOT involved in that!’

‘You have ten seconds to explain those gentlemen before I call the Prime Minister.’

‘We’re helping them, a joint project,’ Rawlins hurriedly explained.

‘What kind of project, exactly?’ Beesely demanded.

‘Secret stem cell research in the UK, stuff they can’t do in the States.’

‘Rawlins, you bleeding idiot –’

‘What? What is it?’

‘It’s not stem cell research, it’s bio-weapons. And they are not official US Government, they are selling it to the Russians - one Boris Luchenkov.’

‘What?’ Rawlins screamed.

‘Save yourself a long jail term, Rawlins. Pull out all the stops and send me everything you know. They played you for a fool, which does not seem so hard to do.’

‘I had an official request from DTI and the Defence Minister!’

‘Who were duped as well. I expect the files by tomorrow.’ He hung up and sat back, running a hand over his scalp.

‘You believe him?’ Johnno asked.

‘Yes, it would be easy enough to get State Department requests to help them with stem cell stuff - it’s no longer

allowed in the US, been dodgy for a few years. Besides, by all accounts this *is* Stem Cell research - it's just the end use that's in question.' He faced Otto. 'I want all UK companies involved in Stem Cell research. Add them quickly to the list to buy into.'

Otto lifted his phone, returning to scan the screens.

Beesely stood. 'I need to pop upstairs for five minutes.'

After the knock, Susan opened the door for Beesely. He glanced in hesitantly before stepping inside. Sitting on the bed next to Dame Helen he held her hand as Mike paced up and down, his arms folded.

'It was not Rawlins.' She did not respond. Beesely continued, 'He had official requests for stem cell research on the QT, helped them out. Looks like they duped him and our Government.'

'Get back to it,' she whispered, turning away and closing her eyes.

'How is Helen?' Otto enquired upon Beesely's return.

'She was recovering well, but that was a bit of a shock. She'll be OK tomorrow.'

Patrick walked in. 'Back to work.'

'You ordered out?' Johnno asked. Patrick nodded, returning to the boards.

Beesely glanced at the TV screens and sighed. 'How are we doing?'

'Drug stocks are stable, we are *accumulating*,' Otto indicated.

'That's a stock market term,' Beesely stated. He read his notes. 'High volume trading when the price is not moving. Yes?'

Otto smiled. 'You are learning.'

'How much do we have?'

‘A quarter of what we might need to get control of twenty two smaller companies.’

‘Sounds as if we’re a long way away from what we need?’ Beesely grumbled.

‘The Society is helping, and they make us look as the small fly,’ Otto offered.

‘Small *fly*,’ Beesely corrected him, smiling. ‘How does that help?’

‘Tomorrow we will meet and they will assign the voting rights of their stock to us, giving us control.’

Beesely was mildly shocked. ‘They’ll be happy to trust us?’

‘They have nothing to worry about, we do not have access to their money or shares, only control of the projects and the boardroom.’

‘Ah, right.’ Then whispering Beesely said, ‘And then there’s the French group.’

‘It would make sense if we assign our rights to them,’ Otto suggested.

‘Really? Why?’

‘They have American links, so our involvement will not cause problems. Foreign companies are not allowed to control certain technology companies in the US.’

‘Ah, yes. Good idea. Any clue as to figures?’

‘None. We would have to talk with the Society tomorrow when all transactions are settled.’

Beesely sat down, taking out his chocolate.

‘You need a kip?’ Johno asked.

‘Not yet, had one earlier.’

‘Sir,’ buzzed from his phone.

‘Yes.’

‘One of the men we are interested in has used his credit card in Germany.’

‘Grab him, bring him here. Several teams, be discreet.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Lucky break,’ Johnno muttered.

Beesely tipped his head. ‘Did they not all fly back to the States?’

‘Snuck back in?’ Johnno queried.

‘Suspicious.’ Beesely pressed his phone again. ‘That man in Germany, I want discreet distance observation only. Tag him with trackers and bug him. Do not kidnap him, OK?’

‘What you thinking?’ Johnno pressed. ‘He’ll lead us to others?’

‘No, I’m thinking it smells too much like bait. He’s out of the country, like that other one, Glass, yet his credit card is here.’

‘Maybe someone nicked his credit card, using it for child porn.’

Beesely grimaced. ‘Child porn?’

‘That’s what most perverts do, use a nicked credit card to access the dodgy sites, instead of their own credit card.’

‘Really?’ Beesely stared ahead. ‘Otto.’ Otto stepped closer. ‘We have the credit card details of the Yanks and the Canadian? Enough to sign them up for porn sites?’

‘Yes, we have access to the card clearing companies that the airlines use.’

‘Right, sign them all up to several of the worst porn sites.’ With a curious frown Otto lifted his phone. Beesely added, ‘There’re supposed to be some certain sites that the FBI watches. I read about it. Do we know them?’ Otto shook his head. ‘OK, sign them up for *numerous* sites.’

‘What’ll that achieve?’ Johnno asked. ‘Other than pissing them off *and* getting them divorced.’

Beesely grinned. ‘When you figure it out, get yourself a cookie.’

The Gypsy's lorry had, eventually, been freed from the pond and the engine re-started after several hours of hard work. Now it was being driven along an 'A' road some ten miles from Church Fenton. Beside it a Range Rover tried to overtake.

As the Range Rover pulled alongside a cooler in the rear was opened, a specially loaded magazine quickly slapped into an M4. The weapon was cocked as the lorry cabin drew near, the lorry driver's window open just a crack.

As the driver turned his head the first round hit his window, a specially fashioned hard plastic that shattered the window, but also shattered itself – now in a hundred fragments back along the road. The second round was frozen sugar crystal, hitting the driver in the neck and puncturing his aorta. Third and fourth rounds, also sugar crystal, were quickly fired into the face of the passenger, one penetrating his eye.

The Range Rover's brakes were hit hard, the lorry speeding onwards for several seconds before veering off to the right and into a ditch, hitting a tree. Both driver and passenger, not wearing seatbelts, went through the windscreen. The Range Rover drove on.

The shooter turned his head to the agent in the rear. 'The sugar crystal is hardest when frozen. Now it will dissolve quickly in the blood of the men. And if a sugar round hit something other than flesh it would shatter into a million pieces. In the blood of these men it will look like they had a can of that Red Bull drink, that's all. No coroner has ever found it yet.'

* * *

'This is odd,' Bambitou's assistant reported, flicking her hair over her shoulder.

‘What?’ Bambitou asked.

Ms Tracey explained, ‘That dead CIA agent, he just signed up for some of the child porn sites we monitor,’ she said with a frown. They both stared at the computer screen.

‘Someone steal his card?’

‘No, saw it listed in evidence. Same card.’

‘They order a pizza with it?’

She looked up, a scowl evident. ‘No.’

‘So not cops then!’ he joked.

‘I’ve tracked back the IP address. It’s one of those dead-end addresses, somewhere in Europe.’

‘So, his buddies in the European branch of the CIA are having a joke at his expense.’

‘Oh.’ Flashing on her screen caught her attention.

‘What?’

She opened a new window. ‘The same card just opened accounts on two-dozen more sites. Same IP address, untraceable.’

‘Someone likes their kiddy porn,’ Bambitou stated.

‘This is odd. Same IP address just opened up dozens more on other credit cards.’

‘Busy puppies!’

She studied the screen. ‘You know what, I think you’re going to owe me several large and expensive dinners,’ she confidently announced, a cheeky wink at him.

‘What you done?’ He glanced at the screen, then back to her smile.

‘One of the names of the other credit cards sat next to our stiff, Mr. Glass, on a flight recently. Someone is giving us them on a plate.’

‘Slow down, honey. Say that again in English.’

‘Dead CIA man, and his buddies, are all being signed up for porn sites, knowing that we would be watching and could cross match.’

Bambitou stood, looking deadly serious. ‘Honey, speculate, you’re good at that.’

She made a face. ‘They are all up to no good, and someone wants to bring that to our attention.’

‘Who else is going to see that?’ he asked, pointing at the screen.

‘CIA, NSA.’

‘There goes the neighbourhood. Never mind.’

‘Oh ... my ... God.’ She looked up, suddenly horrified. ‘These men, they were all in Switzerland when that thing was happening!’

Bambitou dropped his coffee. Looking out of their New York window he said, ‘From now on, Ms Tracey, I won’t call you Dick.’

Bambitou walked into the New York director’s office, suddenly stopped in his tracks by the two DOD men.

Director Chambers appeared harassed. ‘Bambitou, come on in, we were just ... discussing the case.’

Bambitou sat, before shocking his boss by putting his feet up on the desk. He took out his revolver and placed it down onto the desk to the curious observation of his superior.

Chambers stared at the feet, the revolver, then Bambitou’s expression. ‘Special Agent Bambitou?’ His subordinate folded his arms and stared at the two D.O.D. men. ‘Bambitou?’ Chambers repeated, more surprised than annoyed.

Bambitou began, ‘I just had a look at the computer. Pulled out a list of six names, the Canadian gentleman I ignored. Do the names Phillips, Welt, Preston, Schooner and Daley mean anything to you?’

The D.O.D. men glanced at each other, offering stern faces for Bambitou. ‘We cannot discuss government operatives.’

Bambitou pointed at them. 'You know ... you really, really should not have said that. Should have denied all knowledge of these men.'

'Bambitou, what is this about? And why the hell are your shoes on my desk?' Chambers was getting louder.

Bambitou turned his head to his boss. 'Our hotel stiff, sliced and diced - CIA by these gentlemen's admission - is linked to six other men of a similar ... *persuasion*. What they have in common are two things, besides their persuasion. One, they flew to Switzerland or Europe the day before that bank robbery thing, flew back the day after. Two, they all had large sums deposited in their accounts upon their return.'

Chambers' jaw dropped. He and Bambitou turned back to the two DOD men, who were now less than sure of themselves. Chambers pressed a button on his phone. 'Send in four agents. Armed.'

Bambitou picked up his revolver and let down his feet. 'Gentlemen, you are under arrest for conspiracy to ... conceal grand international robbery.'

4

Johnno wandered back into Beesely's office and glanced at the boards. Approaching Beesely's desk he said, 'Herr Mole just rang, he took a call whilst Stateside from that Russian. Four explosions in Luchenkov's businesses and houses, lots dead, Boris fella stabbed in prison, but apparently still alive.'

Otto stepped nearer. 'We paid Vladimir. He's attacking Luchenkov,' he explained.

Beesely considered it. 'Keep the pressure up on him. We want all of Luchenkov's infrastructure smashed.' He stood and looked towards the animated TV screens. 'How's it going?'

‘Like a yo-yo,’ Otto carefully pronounced.

‘We making some money?’ Johno asked.

‘Yes, a lot. And we now have as much of the drug shares as I believe we will need.’

‘How much longer is it, you know, the Dow ... operating?’ Beesely asked.

‘Open,’ Otto corrected. ‘It will be *open* for another three hours.’

‘Where is it now?’

‘It has recovered everything it has lost. It will be reported as a *one-day shakeout*. There will be some difficult questions asked.’

Beesely gave a quick, pained expression. ‘Will Swiss banking laws protect us?’

‘Yes, I think so. We will say that we were acting for others.’

Susan wheeled in Dame Helen, Beesely immediately walking around to her. ‘Are you OK?’

‘Fine,’ she snapped, clearly irritated. ‘How goes the war?’

‘Good. I think we got everything we wanted. Made some money as well.’ He asked Otto a question with his expression.

‘Perhaps two hundred million dollars.’

‘Bloody hell!’ Susan let out.

‘Sir,’ buzzed from his phone.

‘Yes,’ Johno said, pressing a button as he sat on the side of the desk.

‘The American Ambassador, sir.’

‘Tell him Beesely is washing his hair.’ He hung up.

Beesely turned back to Dame Helen.

‘I’m fine,’ she quietly insisted, coughing. ‘Fight the good fight, eh?’ She did not seem convinced by her own words.

‘And we’re winning,’ Beesely enthused, adding, ‘Slowly.’

‘Any strawberries?’ Dame Helen asked.

‘That’s more like it,’ Susan approved. She turned to Beesely, ‘Spoil us with some nice food.’

Johno pressed the phone. ‘We want strawberries, ice cream and an assortment of milkshakes, plus local chocolate and cake.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Good boy,’ Susan sarcastically offered. ‘Did you learn to use the phone in the Army?’

Otto answered his phone, facing away from them. ‘He is washing his hair.’ He hung up and turned back around. ‘Americans very keen to talk with you.’

‘Really,’ Johno began, frowning heavily and shaking his head. ‘Can’t think why?’

Beesely turned to Otto. ‘We in trouble with those stock market regulators?’

‘The Securities Exchange,’ Otto informed him. ‘And no, I do not believe so. It would take a week to find out exactly what happened.’

‘Still, we should shut it down,’ Beesely suggested, clearly concerned.

Johno pressed the phone. ‘Tell all our stock market friends that we are *out of the game*.’ He hung up.

‘Sir?’ buzzed back from the phone.

‘Christ!’ Johno quietly let out. ‘Yes?’

‘Minister Blaum for Herr Beesely.’

‘OK.’ Johno eased up off the desk as Beesely walked back around and sat.

He pressed a button. ‘Minister Blaum?’

‘Beesely, what on earth is going on?’

Beesely winced and glanced at Otto. Otto returned a neutral expression, as usual. ‘Going on?’

‘I just had the American President on the phone!’

Beesely glanced around the faces.

‘Now we’re in the shit,’ Johnno quietly suggested. ‘He wants his money back.’

‘Minister Blaum, what did the President want?’

‘He wanted to convey to you of his best wishes ... and that he assures you that he will investigate the attack on your bank with vigour and get to the bottom of it. He wants you to call him.’

Johnno turned to Susan. ‘Slap me.’ She did. Hard. ‘Nope, still feels like the Twilight Zone.’

The group stared at each other. Beesely held up his open palms in a question.

Blaum added, ‘Beesely, he is offering compensation for you.’

Otto’s jaw dropped.

Beesely finally said, ‘That’s good to know. I’ll ... get back to you.’ He hung up. Silence claimed the room for many seconds.

‘Sir,’ buzzed from his phone.

‘Yes?’

‘Mister Rawlins, MI5.’

Beesely glanced at Dame Helen. ‘Put him through.’

‘Beesely?’

‘Yes?’

‘I just had a long and difficult conversation with the Prime Minister.’

‘And?’

‘He’s very annoyed at being duped by the Americans, discreet top-level enquiry under way, all known projects cancelled. We’re launching our own enquiry.’

‘That’s good to know, Mister Rawlins.’

‘Listen well, Beesely. My loyalty to my country is not in doubt. I’m on your side and a potential ally, under the right circumstances. I don’t approve of organizations like yours running outside of the law, but I respect what

you've done. Don't make the mistake of thinking I'm on the opposing team.' He hung up abruptly.

Beesely eased back into his chair, quizzing Dame Helen with his look.

She quietly let out, 'I guess he's not such an arsehole after all.'

Johno stepped closer. 'We never did stitch him up.'

'No?' Beesely asked with a concerned look. 'You mean, I was bluffing him?'

Johno laughed as the requested food appeared.

'Sir?' buzzed from his phone.

'God, what now?' Beesely asked, irritated.

'Sir, David from The Lodge.'

Calmer, he said, 'OK, Put him through.'

'Beesely? It's David.'

'How are you David?'

'Right now? Wishing that you were the damn chairman!'

'Really, why?'

'Pressure. And all of it related to you!'

'Pressure?'

'*Someone* ... signed up six CIA agents to kiddy porn sites –' Johno glanced around the room at the various faces. Otto put a hand over his eyes. '- which tied them together and their recent trip to Europe. They also had large sums of money transferred to their bank accounts after the trip. One was killed in a New York hotel room, chopped to pieces, so the FBI got involved, noticed the money and the link and the kiddy porn. They told the President, who now thinks that some element of the CIA attacked you. White House is reeling.'

'Well, I'm afraid that I am going to have to spoil your day, David.'

There was a pause. 'What's going on, Beesely?'

‘You don’t know, do you? What Henry was really into?’

‘He took money from Luchenkov to attack you, using it as a blind to kill Olly, moving him up to number one.’

‘Nope.’ Beesely waited.

‘No?’

‘No. Any other ideas?’ Beesely toyed with him.

‘That’s what happened, we have all the evidence,’ David insisted.

‘Groups within groups, lies on top of lies.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Are you sitting down?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you alone?’

‘Yes.’

‘Henry got hold of Project Darwin technology, finished it off and tried to sell it to the Russians.’

Johnno winced and held his hands to his face. Helen and Susan glanced at him, startled and unsure as to what was going on. David made no response.

Beesely continued, ‘That is what those six CIA guys were doing, destroying the evidence and covering tracks. Unfortunately they left some. You still there?’

‘God, Beesely, you’ve got to help us out of this. If the FBI get hold of this ... Jesus! Either way we are screwed. They came to attack you ... or they came for the bio-weapons. This could bring down the President!’

Susan shook her head. ‘I’m not really here.’

‘Want a slap?’ Johnno whispered.

‘David, leave it with me, I’ll see what I can do. May be some favours asked.’ He hung up and eased back. ‘Well, that *is* interesting. We have the American President over a barrel.’ He noticed the food. ‘Have some strawberries, they look great.’

Otto stepped forwards. 'When I go home to my girlfriend ... I do not tell her what I do in my work.'

'Why?' Johno asked. 'Afraid she won't believe you?' He grabbed a milkshake. 'Hey, Pistachio!'

Susan took it off him. 'My favourite.'

Beesely sat drumming his fingers on the desk, staring out of the open door.

Johno noticed. 'I know that finger drum. You're about to be a sneaky bastard, aren't you.'

Without answering Beesely grabbed a fresh sheet of paper. He started scribbling pictures on the paper before joining them up; some dotted lines, some circles, even some arrows. Otto wandered past, glancing at the pictures. He did not understand them. Johno had a look, laughing. Waiting, they tucked into the strawberries and cream, Thomas appearing and grabbing some before disappearing a minute later.

'Haven't seen the little monster much lately,' Johno realised as Thomas left.

'Johno,' Dame Helen called. 'You are a moron sometimes.' Johno stopped and stared, raising his eyebrows at her. Otto turned to her, frowning. Dame Helen added, 'There are four teenage girls upstairs, all older and taller than him.'

'Oh!' Johno let out, turning to Otto. 'Hormones.'

Otto suddenly realised. 'Ah, yes. I understand now.'

Beesely laughed, his self-generated mirth not detracting from his drawing. Finally he looked up. 'OK, I have a plan. Complicated, mind you.' He looked across the desk, frowning. 'What happened to the strawberries?'

'We ate them,' Johno said. 'You've been scribbling for half an hour,' he lied.

'Was I? That long?'

'So what's the big plan?' Johno asked. 'Took bleeding long enough.'

Beesely wagged his pen. 'Can't risk telling the President about the germs, we will have to deal with that ourselves. Can't threaten The Lodge either. Not out the woods yet, going to have to get sneaky.' He checked his notes. 'OK, I think I'm ready. Everyone sit please, this may take some time. Right, what's first?' he asked himself. 'Ah yes.' He pressed a button on his phone. 'British Prime Minister, please. Any difficulty, tell them it's important.'

'Sir, it's eleven o'clock in the UK?'

'Really? Might have to wake him. In fact, tell him it's a crisis.'

They waited a full two minutes.

'Sir Morris?' came the British Prime Minister's deep voice.

'Yes, Prime Minister. Did I wake you?'

'I was just about to nod off. What's the crisis? Is it these bio-labs?'

'The Americans have tied in some of their currently serving CIA agents to the attack on us *and* the bio-weapons. FBI has found out.'

'That must be very awkward for them. Surely you are not suggesting the American Government had a hand in it?'

'No, Prime Minister, it was a rogue element. But the President is over a barrel and could lose his presidency if this gets out and goes pear shaped.'

'I am not sure where you are going with this, I would have thought you would be rather unhappy with them right now?'

'I am a practical man, Prime Minister. There is a solution to the benefit of us all, including yourself.'

'Me?'

‘Yes. I would like you to call the President, straight away if you don’t mind, and tell him that I am ... an MI6 plant under your direct control.’

‘What?’

‘Then I’m going to release a statement exonerating the CIA agents. Going to recommend them for a medal.’

‘A medal?’

‘Only way to let the President off the hook, Prime Minister. Plus you get the benefit, sir, and the Yanks will be asking you for favours in the future if they think you influence me.’

‘That’s ... extraordinary, Sir Morris.’

‘Yes, Prime Minister. But necessary to protect what we believe in. Will you make the call for me? Tell him that *you* – personally - will sort it?’

‘I’ll ... I’ll do as you ask. But tomorrow I want a full brief.’

‘Thank you, sir. Good night.’ He pressed END. They were staring at him. ‘Method in my madness,’ he insisted with a wry smile.

Dame Helen asked, ‘How is the President going to get off the hook?’

Beesely held up a finger and smiled coyly. He pressed a button. ‘Minister Blaum, please. At home if necessary.’ They waited.

‘Beesely?’

‘Yes, Minister. Hope I did not wake you?’

‘I am not so old, Herr Beesely, although I have aged some since you came to Switzerland.’

Dame Helen smiled.

‘Sorry, I was just talking with the British Prime Minister.’

‘Did you wake *him*?’

‘Yes. Anyway, listen. Need you to release the following statement through your press office straight

away, copy direct to the American President, then a copy to every American news agency. And I mean *every one*.'

'What are you up to Beesely? Is this to do with the strange stock market trading today?'

'I'm afraid I don't know anything about - what did you say - *stock trading*. You'd have to talk with Otto about stuff like that.' Beesely crossed his fingers and held them up.

'Oh ... OK.'

'Listen, do you have a paper and pen? You will need to have this down accurately.'

'OK, I am ready. This phone records.'

'This is what to release. The Swiss Government and the Directors of the International Bank of Zurich, with its facilities in Zurich and Zug, would like to *thank* the American Government, and in particular the CIA, for its timely assistance in last week's attempted robbery. They had tried to keep the role of the CIA and British Intelligence secret, but the information leaked out.

'We wish to thank the six CIA agents who infiltrated the gang and flew to Europe undercover, pretending to be part of the gang. Their role was crucial and they helped to save lives in Switzerland. We will be recommending these men for medals, both in their home country and in Switzerland—'

'Beesely ... what are you up to?'

'Just bear with me, all will be well. To continue, medals in Switzerland ... We would also like to point out that payments made to them by the bank itself or other, as yet unnamed benefactors, were not authorised by the Swiss or US Government and have caused a lot of embarrassment for the agents themselves, their families and their superiors. The money has been handed over to the President's office and has been earmarked for various charities.

‘Neither the Swiss Government nor the directors of the bank involved blame the US Government for anything ... and hold the US President in high regard. The CIA acted diligently in its actions and were in discussions with us at all times.’

‘Beesely, this is horse shit you are giving me!’

‘You know that, Minister, and I know that, but the American people don’t know that. Please do as I ask for now, then pop down tomorrow some time.’

‘OK, I will do it. But, I seriously hope you know what you are doing.’ He hung up.

‘OK,’ Johno began. ‘I don’t know about anyone else, but I’m really fucking confused.’

‘Clever,’ Dame Helen offered with a grin. ‘President is off the hook, owes a few favours to our Prime Minister. These six guys are in the spotlight, so is what they may have been up to. Prime Minister owes you a few favours. Three birds with one stone.’

‘What happened to the French?’ Beesely asked, suddenly concerned.

‘They are still trading,’ Otto informed him.

Beesely ordered, ‘Stand down silent alarm, but stand ready. Johno, take the French to the Spa Hotel, make sure they are comfortable.’

Johno stopped dead and stared. ‘Me? You mad?’

‘Madness in my methods. Go.’

Johno stood, shrugged at Otto and left.

‘They do not like him,’ Otto puzzled.

‘One does,’ Beesely said with a wink. ‘Besides, they made a lot of money today, they’ll be buoyant. Right, Otto, tomorrow: I want the French here at twelve noon, Blaum before or after, the Society same time as the French. Ask our bank CEO, Mathius, to invite the US Ambassador to Zurich for lunch and a photo opportunity

in the morning, arrange it tonight. Full review tomorrow of drug companies, and how many we control.'

He turned his head. 'Helen, your input was very helpful, thanks. Susan, Patrick, apologies for spoiling your holiday. Now please get lost before I fall asleep in front of you.'

* * *

Pepi kicked over a chair in anger, causing his twenty-six year old daughter, Maria, to rush in.

'Papa!' She righted the chair. 'What is it?'

Pepi leant against his desk. 'What else would make my blood pressure rise?'

She sighed, offering a sympathetic look. 'K2?'

Pepi nodded. 'They have sent money to Russia, destroying Luchenkov's infrastructure. They are trying to kill him in prison, he was stabbed today.'

'You have a meeting with the bosses tomorrow,' she pointedly reminded her father.

Pepi made eye contact, his concern evident. He swivelled and grabbed a report, thrusting it at her.

She read the detail. 'British Prime Minister, Director of the CIA, the American President!' She looked up and waited.

Pepi let out a breath. 'K2 is rapidly becoming the focus of Western Intelligence.'

A hard day on the DAX

1

Johnno walked into the office block next to the castle and into the room set up for the French, the air thick with the smell of coffee and French cigarettes. The traders were sat around chatting, obviously done with any practical trading.

‘Are we all done, ladies and gentlemen?’ They all turned toward him. ‘If you’re ready, we have a five star hotel and Spa waiting ready for you. And a French chef!’

‘We came down for the day,’ a man informed him, although he looked pretty tired to Johnno.

Johnno held his hands wide. ‘Least we can do is look after you. If you stay at the Spa tonight we’ll fly you back tomorrow, Learjet or helicopter. I’ll even fly you myself.’ They laughed. ‘No, seriously. I’m a pilot as well.’

‘A man of many talents,’ the arm-lock woman noted.

‘I won’t boast. Not when the lights are on at least,’ he said with a grin.

‘We have no spare clothes,’ the second woman suggested.

‘Ask room service, they’ll buy you some, there’ll be no charge.’

‘I like this hotel!’ the man suggested.

They glanced at each other, chattering quickly in French. ‘OK,’ they said, standing. ‘The hotel.’

K2 staff began cleaning and re-arranging desks as Johnno led the visitors out. They clambered into two Range Rovers, Johnno driving one.

* * *

Special Agent Bambitou eased out his car and slowly approached an isolated, three-story wooden house. A blanket lay over a body in a field some fifty yards away, just visible in the dawn haze, yellow police tapes sectioning off the road and garden.

Another body lay face down in the garden, also covered. Bambitou stopped and took in the ploughed field; a large flock of birds circled, looking like vultures waiting for some carrion.

He turned to face the house. Two windows with bullet holes, he noticed. The rest of the house appeared well decorated enough; it certainly looked lived-in. There were two cars in the rear, new and expensive. And clearly out of character with the property and this area of Long Island. Coughing away a lack of sleep and a long drive he walked inside in his bright blue FBI jacket.

‘I’m the Sheriff,’ a voice called, sounding equally as tired. The sheriff stepped up, pen and notebook in hand.

‘Special Agent Bambitou. FBI.’

The Sheriff glanced at the large yellow letters on Bambitou’s jacket, then made eye contact and waited.

‘It does what it says on the tin,’ Bambitou joked. ‘What we got?’

‘Spies.’

Bambitou raised an eyebrow as deputies shuffled past. ‘Spies?’

‘Each of the stiffs had two or three really good IDs, plus a shit load of high-tech weapons. Rifles loaded with Teflon rounds.’

‘Not local boys then?’ He coughed out a short laugh. ‘How many?’

‘One in the field, one in the yard, five in here.’

‘How did they die?’

‘That’s the good bit, and why they pay you the big bucks. Press will be all over it. First two, broken necks.

No sign of a fall or struggle. One with a knife, obviously thrown, one shot between the eyes, one with a crushed windpipe, and one beaten senseless and cut-up, maybe tortured.'

'Question is, who did what to who? What about the guy in the field? Last man standing?'

'Trail of blood. No blood trail on the rest. So yeah, maybe.'

'How did that one die?'

'Neck wound. Looked like the broken end of a bottle. He had some sort of phone in his hand.'

'Sort of?'

'Weird thing. Still there.'

Bambitou turned and stepped out, across the road and into the muddy field to the lone body. He could see the trail of blood, way too much to survive such a wound. The man's arm stretched outside the blanket, a large phone in his lifeless hand.

Bambitou crouched down next to the strange phone. The only other phone he had seen of this type had been when sailing; a satellite phone. It started to chirp. Bambitou checked over his shoulder. No one was looking.

Loosening it from the dead man's grip he raised it. He noted the two large buttons, red and green. He pressed green and lifted it closer to his face.

'Mr. Grey, this is operations. Status, over,' came a polite female voice.

'I'm afraid your Mister Grey is dead, lying face down in a field in Long Island. Who are you?'

There was a pause. 'Who are you, sir?' the polite voice asked.

'This is Special Agent Bambitou of the New York FBI. Now your turn.'

‘One moment please.’ He could hear a click as he waited. Unknown to him, he was being carefully observed through a powerful telescopic sight.

* * *

‘A good evening with the French?’ Beesely asked, barely registering Johnno’s laboured entrance.

‘God, what happened to you?’ Susan asked, she and Patrick now concerned. Dame Helen ‘tutted’.

Johnno limped in, looking as if he had slept rough after a drunken fight; his lip was cut, a black eye forming.

At first Otto was genuinely concerned. ‘You were attacked?’ he asked, stepping quickly across.

‘Oh, yeah,’ Johnno winked and smiled. ‘Slapped and beaten silly.’

‘What happened to you?’ Otto pressed, now very confused.

‘A little French lady happened to him,’ Beesely suggested without looking up from his file.

Otto cocked an eyebrow and tipped his head.

‘You had a fight with that French girl?’ Susan asked, horrified.

‘No, Susan,’ Beesely explained, glancing up at her. ‘He had rough sex with her.’

‘How did you know about her?’ Johnno asked Beesely.

‘A travelling shoe salesman once told me ... that if a girl hits you it is because she likes you. Also, that if you really infuriate a girl it is because she loves you and can’t control you.’

Otto smiled. ‘What does that t-shirt of yours say, Johnno?’

‘Success is measured by the number of women you *really* piss off!’ Johnno quoted.

Beesely looked Johnno over. ‘Worth it?’

‘Oh, yeah. But I’m not a fan of hairy armpits.’ He took Beesely’s lukewarm coffee and downed it quickly.

Patrick hid his envious smile, Dame Helen shaking her head. Beesely called them to order as newspapers were brought in. He handed them out.

‘Scan these for any relevant news, stock markets or Yanks.’ He tapped his phone. ‘Get me Duncan, newspaper reporter, London.’ He waited.

‘Hello?’ came a sleepy voice.

‘Did I wake you?’ Beesely toyed.

‘Yes,’ came firmly back.

‘That analyst we hired, I almost forgot him. Need him on the job hundred percent today. Look for stock market irregularities. You too. I will need you bright eyed and bushy tailed in an hour or two. What’s the time there?’

‘Six thirty?’

‘What time did you get to bed?’

‘About six thirty.’

‘Best get yourself a coffee then, or doze by the phone.’ He hung up.

Adrianne, telephone operator and the head decorator’s daughter, appeared in the doorway. She knocked and peeked in. Beesely smiled warmly, waving her in. She trotted in, placed down a tin of Quality Street chocolates and kissed Beesely quickly on the cheek. ‘From London, sir.’ She trotted out without waiting.

‘Lovely girl,’ Beesely muttered, opening the tin.

‘Didn’t get my peck on the cheek again,’ Johnno complained.

Beesely peered at him from under his eyebrows. ‘Had a look in the mirror this morning, have we?’

A manager ran in and gave Johnno a note. Johnno read it quickly as the man waited. 'Can it be traced?'

'No, sir.'

'Put it through here.' The man ran out. 'Mr. Grey is dead, FBI have the body.'

Beesely straightened and breathed loudly, running a hand over his scalp.

'Hello?' came a bass baritone voice from the desk phone.

Johnno turned the phone closer to himself. 'Hello yourself. Mr. Grey dead I hear?'

'You don't sound American, neither did the young lady who spoke before.'

'British Secret Service,' Johnno stated, Dame Helen raising her hands in complaint.

The caller paused. 'British Secret Service? Well, there are seven dead bodies here. They belong to you?'

'No. The one you took the phone off was an agent for *your* government, just about the best there was. Treat his body with respect, FBI man.'

'And the other six?'

'How did they die?'

'Two broken necks, one throwing knife, one shot between the eyes, one crushed windpipe and one tortured to death. Found the guy with the phone fifty yards away, he bled out from a neck wound. Don't suppose you want to tell me what this is all about?'

'The man with the phone, good guy. The rest are still yours, but batting for the wrong team. One a hero, the others financially motivated. Understand?'

'I think so. Any chance this is linked to that Swiss thing?'

'You might think that, I could not possibly comment. Listen, FBI man, do you believe everything you read in the papers?'

‘Not always.’

‘Cast a discerning eye over this morning’s headlines. Read between the lines.’

‘Can I call you again?’

‘What purpose would that serve for either of us?’

‘I don’t like these spy shits running around my back yard. Any help from any quarter would be appreciated. It’s not like I’m going to get any from my own government.’

Johno turned his head to Beesely. After a moment’s reflection Beesely nodded. ‘Keep the phone somewhere safe. But jerk us around and there will be one hell of a penalty.’ Johno hung up and then stood, walking to the end of the office.

‘Who was Mister Grey?’ Susan delicately enquired.

‘That the man I met?’ Dame Helen asked.

Beesely nodded at her. ‘He was one of our best agents. A great loss, but he lost perspective. He went looking for revenge.’

‘So do we!’ Johno firmly pointed out.

‘Not hand to hand, we don’t. It sounds as if he walked into that damn house unarmed - something to prove. We’d blow it up from a distance.’

‘Anyone want four puppies?’ Johno quietly asked.

Beesely sighed. ‘Stanton’s wife will take it hard, and the young girl.’

* * *

Bambitou stopped at a petrol station and pulled in. Stretching, he eased out and walked over to the newspaper stand. Putting in quarters he took out three papers. Switzerland! What a surprise, he considered. Sitting in his car he started to read the papers.

Johno's satellite phone started to vibrate. He stepped to the far end of Beesely's office. 'Yeah?'

'There is a Flight Lieutenant McNamara, RAF Marham, on the line.'

'Put him through,' Johno keenly encouraged.

'Johno?'

'Yeah. That you Rupert?'

'Are you any better looking?'

'Fuck off!' They laughed. 'What you up to? Shuffling papers around a desk?'

'I'm not really an RAF officer, not most of the time. Remember that *other* unit I mentioned?'

'Yeah, Trooper Snoopers.'

'Well, we received some traffic intercepts - four man ex-SAS team that has been working in Africa, real hard cases. They're in Switzerland, heading after your boss.' Johno clicked his fingers at Beesely as he walked across the office, his features suddenly turning to stone. 'All we know is something about a hotel spa.'

'Otto!' Johno screamed. 'Silent alarm at the Spa Hotel!' He sprinted out.

Beesely stabbed at the phone. 'Hotel Spa under attack. Get us some helicopter support if available - Condor Squadron!'

In the courtyard Johno screamed at the SAS reaction squad as he ran. 'On me!' They ran out. 'Vehicles! Hotel Spa!' He jumped into his silver Mercedes SL, the vehicle unlocking automatically as he neared it. However, Mercedes designers were more interested in the safety of their customers than in sound effects and, despite selecting 'sport' mode, the coupe pulled off without tyres screeching and with excellent road holding.

The troopers piled into the Range Rovers, K2 guards in the driving seat. Hitting the horn hard Johno shot down the

camp road, people flying out of the way. With the gates rapidly approaching he desperately used the horn. They were opening, but not quick enough; he smashed his offside without stopping, turning hard right out of the gate and towards the spa.

At speeds of ninety kilometres per hour on the heavily forested country roads he near-missed several locals, covering the two miles to the Spa in a matter of minutes.

The entrance to the Spa did not host a gate, just two large brick pillars terminating a low hedge, leading inside to the gravel forecourt and ornate carp pond with gentle fountains. Unfortunately, the Spa nestled sedately between thick woods with picturesque nature walks, making a stealthy approach easy enough for a potential attacker, observation of the Spa unseen a simple enough task.

He slowed, tooting the horn as he turned in and skidded sideways across the gravel, noticing many elderly guests walking to and from the entrance steps. Halting, he reached across to the glove compartment and grabbed a Browning 9mm. Still stretched awkwardly across the seats he released the magazine, checked it and re-loaded, pulling the slide back.

His windscreen shattered; a high-power shot, silenced. Two more shots tore up his seat. He pushed the passenger door open and scrambled across, dumping himself roughly onto the gravel with a forward roll.

A hollow, tinny sound indicated that they were puncturing the bodywork, hoping to hit him. Obviously they did not have the angle, he considered, or he would be dead. A tyre burst and hissed.

On his back he looked up at the four-storey hotel, guests in windows peering down at him. From under the car he could see the feet of guests moving about. They were in the crossfire. He raised his pistol above the bonnet and fired three times into the air.

Now the elderly guests were shrieking and moving inside. And they were probably confusing the sniper, he considered. He jumped up and sprinted towards the side of the hotel, a single shot cracking past him and throwing up gravel.

As he reached the safety of solid walls the Range Rovers came skidding in. Johnno frantically waved, making a hand signal of a gun - forefinger and thumb - thrusting towards the woods to the east. The first Range Rover pulled in right next to him, the second going around in a large circle of spewed gravel and speeding back out of the driveway.

Johnno grabbed his phone as troopers piled out. 'Sniper to the east, in the woods. Surround it!' He grabbed troopers by the scruff of the neck and threw them towards the side of the hotel as they emerged, all wearing their usual black fatigues and carrying MP5s.

A K2 helicopter, an Italian-made Agusta, shot past, banking hard and flaring out as it tried to slow. It circled as Johnno led the troopers to the side entrance.

The emergency exit to the pool, a glass door, hung wedged open with a pink flip-flop. He grabbed and opened it, rushing in, a burst of warm moist air stinking of chlorine greeting them. Screams went up as he raced around the edges of the pool, pistol in hand, four troopers behind plus two guards. Past the sauna and steam room, into the men's changing room - startling grey haired and pot bellied German businessmen - then into the Spa reception. More guards joined him as he sprinted to the stairs and quickly up two flights, his knee registering its opposition to this morning's chosen method of exercise.

A turn to the right and three doors down, he banged hard with his fist. 'Claire!' He could hear a muffled scream before he jumped clear of the door, his back to the wall. 'Hostage!' he whispered.

Two troopers stood behind him, two opposite. The men made ready as two shots came through the door, digging into the wall opposite.

‘Those are ex-troopers in there!’ he whispered. The men glanced at each other. ‘They will not fall for any tricks, they *know* how we work’.

Johnno put his face as close to the door as he dared. ‘You’re surrounded, boys, nowhere to go!’

The drone of helicopters grew louder.

‘Johnno, come in!’ came a badly distorted stereo voice from each of the trooper’s radios.

Johnno grabbed a radio from one of the troopers next to him. ‘This is Johnno, go ahead.’

‘This is Apache One. We have the room on thermal imager. Two walking around, one on the floor, over.’

‘Do you have a safe firing solution?’

‘Negative, over.’

‘Standby.’

He turned to the trooper opposite. ‘Kick the door down. *Without* ... getting shot!’ he whispered.

The man turned to his buddy. ‘Grab my harness.’ He lowered his MP5, stood at an angle - as much as he dared - then lunged and kicked. Solid, it would not budge. Two more shots cracked through the door, the men ducking tight into the wall.

‘Try - *four three three two*,’ Johnno whispered. The doors had card sweeps and punch codes.

The troopers gave him a look, shaking their fists, then knelt down and then punched the numbers. The door popped open and a trooper pushed it. A burst of automatic fire tore up the wall opposite, a small watercolour now hanging at an angle.

Johnno grabbed the radio and stepped down the corridor, K2 guards now pushing inquisitive guests back into their rooms. ‘Apache One, wait ten seconds then

shoot-up the room for exactly five seconds, nowhere near the occupants. Understand, over?’

‘Apache One, Roger.’

Johno took up position. ‘Ready? Watch my hand. You right, us left.’ They nodded and waited.

Guests popped their heads out of their rooms before quickly slamming the doors and police sirens could now be heard. Then hell and thunder descended on room 112.

The troopers winced at the noise and lowered their heads, shielding themselves with their arms. Masonry flew through the open doorway, and the corridor wall opposite the door seemed to be spitting concrete at them in defiance at its treatment. The roar was deafening, not least the drone of the Apache coming through the now broken room windows.

Johno’s hand had been raised throughout as he counted down, now it dropped. They stormed in.

The first trooper could see legs under a cabinet and a pistol to its side, an Uzi sub-machinegun emerging. He opened up through the cabinet, a full magazine emptied.

Johno rolled over the bed and landed right on top of the second gunman as he lay on the floor next to Claire, a pistol to her head. He thrust his pistol into the man’s neck.

‘Johno?’

Johno straightened. ‘Pete!’

‘Clear!’ came from somewhere. Then another, ‘Clear!’

Two troopers stopped at the head of the gunman, weapons primed. Dust wafted around the room, sirens wailed and the drone of Apaches filled the air.

‘Johno, what are ... what are you doing here?’ the man strained to get out, his face covered in dust.

Johno stared down at his old friend. With a dangerous tone he answered, ‘I’m head of security here, you dumb fuck!’

‘Christ, Johno, if I’d known...’

‘Where’s the fourth man?’ He jammed his pistol in harder.

‘Back-up van, up the road,’ Pete coughed out.

Through gritted teeth Johno ordered. ‘Two things. First, take that damn pistol out of the face of my girlfriend.’ The man’s mouth opened in surprise. ‘Second, get your mate on the radio and tell him to surrender. Now!’

Pete chucked his pistol at the feet of the troopers. A trooper grabbed Claire by the arm and dragged her unceremoniously across the carpet, crunching broken glass and debris. Reaching for his radio Pete called, ‘Steve, mission scrubbed. We’re caught. And Johno is here, plus a hundred other fucking troopers!’

Johno lifted the man up and pushed him onto the bed, attending Claire as she brushed dust off her blue suit and coughed out dust. ‘You OK?’

Troopers started to handcuff Pete with plastic ties.

Johno turned. ‘No! Take him to Beesely. Now!’

Claire took a deep breath, then turned and stared out of the window at the hovering Apache, noticing the other helicopters circling, the air now full of the sound of sirens wailing. She put her hands on her hips and turned to back Johno, glaring. Grabbing him, she quickly took him by the hand and out of the room as guards eased by, down the corridor and past the perplexed soldiers and guards.

Her female colleague stood peering nervously out of a doorway. Claire pushed her inside and closed the door. ‘Lock it, Michelle,’ she told her friend as she started to strip, frantically tearing her clothes off.

Johno stared, open-mouthed. ‘What ... *now*?’

‘Your heart is beating fast, oui?’

Her friend grinned before starting to undress as well.

Don't shoot the messenger

1

Thirty minutes later Beesely ordered, 'I want every guest at the Spa moved someplace else, given a free stay and all compensated ten thousand euros immediately.' He hung up as Pete was marched in, the man's eyes taking in as much detail as he could find.

Nervously, Pete stepped forwards. Glancing at Dame Helen his eyes narrowed. He turned to Beesely, before turning back and saying, 'My God, you're the head of MI6!'

'That's correct,' she coldly stated, eyeing him carefully.

Beesely leant to one side and looked beyond Pete, frowning a question at a guard.

'He is one of the attackers at the spa. Johnno said to bring him to you, no handcuffs.'

'Oh.' Beesely sat back and regarded Pete coolly. 'I'm surprised you are still alive,' he quietly stated.

'I used to serve with Johnno, Paras and SAS.'

'So he spared you, for the moment.' Beesely eased forwards, his elbows on the desk. 'Listen well. You will tell us exactly who hired you, and you will assist us with finding them, or we will tie you to a chair and slowly burn your damn skin off.'

'You don't need to threaten me, sir,' Pete quietly stated, suppressed anger in his voice. 'Johnno's a mate. If I'd known...'

Beesely squinted across the desk. 'Did you know who we were?'

‘No, sir. Or I would have killed the tossers hiring us, you can be sure of that. I love the Regiment, I’d never go up against my own people.’

Beesely eased back. ‘No, I don’t believe you would. Not many would, you are all too closely knit. Still, no chocolates for you.’

‘We had no idea, sir, we just got the instructions and the money, sir. Good money,’ Pete rapidly got out.

‘How much?’

‘Two million a piece, sir, a South African merc’ company.’

Beesely blew out through pursed lips. ‘That is a good price for a job like this. I assume most of it was *payment upon completion*?’

‘We got a quarter mil’ up front, sir. But you can have the money, I don’t want it,’ he spat out, disgusted with himself.

Beesely stopped suddenly, an anguished look at the open doorway. ‘Where’s Johno? Was he hit?’

‘No, sir. He was helping the French lady.’

‘How did you know about her?’ Beesely demanded.

‘Got a message this morning, to grab her. Told that she was the girlfriend of the bodyguard of the boss. Plus to grab the old man if he showed.’

Beesely straightened, scowling. ‘I’m ... the *old man*.’

Pete lowered his head. ‘Sorry, sir.’

Concerned, Beesely made eye contact with Otto. ‘Someone was watching the spa.’ Otto stepped purposefully out. ‘How did you like our air force?’ Beesely asked, putting out his chin.

‘Don’t want to be on the receiving end of an Apache again. Saw them in the first Gulf war.’

‘Quite the deterrent, aren’t they!’

Pete frowned slightly, a questioning look. ‘What *is* this place, sir?’

‘It’s the secret headquarters for a powerful intelligence agency with close links to MI6, CIA and Mossad.’ Pete was stunned. ‘Yes, young man. You went up against an organization bigger than MI6, stocked full of ex-SAS troopers. Last week we had an attack on this place by a hundred mercenaries. Four Hercules aircraft, packed with SAS landed, and *sent them all straight to hell*, to quote a phrase.’

‘Jesus,’ Pete quietly let out.

Johno limped in five minutes later, looking beaten, dirty and injured, his shirt only done-up via three buttons.

‘Dear God, Johno, you alright?’ Dame Helen asked.

‘Yeah, yeah,’ he said with a nod, opening the fridge and taking out two beers. He handed one to Pete.

Beesely followed that action with some interest. ‘Johno, this man attacked us,’ he said with quiet concern.

‘No he didn’t,’ Johno quietly rebutted. ‘He did what he was paid to do. Duped. As with Rawlins, and those mercs’ last week.’

Otto came back in, also surprised by the beer.

Johno noticed his concern. He sat on the cabinet, addressing the group as a whole. ‘Problem with a secret organization ... is that no one knows about it, so they don’t fear attacking it. That Russian idiot, or whoever, can keep hiring people who don’t know about us. And we just shoot them, losing a few people every time.’ He eased back against the wall and waited for their reactions.

‘It is true,’ Otto admitted with a sigh.

Beesely made eye contact with Dame Helen, her expression suggested Johno was correct. ‘What are you suggesting?’ he asked, swivelling his chair around to face Johno. ‘One hour programme on bleeding Panorama?’

‘Yeah, but not on us.’ Johno sipped his beer.

‘Not on us?’ Beesely queried.

‘No, on the Swiss Secret Service and counter terrorist groups. We stage it, pay for it, let everyone in the world think that the Swiss are tough nuts.’

Beesely brightened. ‘Might help.’

‘And,’ Johno began, pointing with the forefinger of the hand holding the beer can, ‘We give Pete here an expense account and a job.’

‘A job with us?’ Beesely snapped.

‘Yeah. We show Pete here all we have to play with, then send him around the world, chit-chatting to every mercenary, security agency or gunman he can find ... and he lets them know what they’d be up against.’

Beesely glanced at Otto, who seemed to agree. He sighed and sat back. ‘Very well. But let’s do it properly, co-ordinate it well.’ Otto agreed.

‘Sir,’ buzzed from his phone.

‘Yes.’

‘Swiss Ministers here, American Ambassador still trying to get through, American President waiting your call back.’

Pete stared at the phone, his jaw dropping.

‘I’m going to shower and see the doctor,’ Johno said as he eased up. ‘Pete, with me.’

* * *

In the Great Hall Johno called in all troopers and castle guards that were nearby, still sipping from his beer can.

At that moment the second surviving attacker was brought in, bound and beaten. ‘Untie him!’ Johno angrily ordered. ‘Now! And get him a doctor!’ His words echoed around the cavernous enclosure.

The guards did as he asked as more men assembled, Johno scrambling up onto the large antique table. ‘Listen up.’ He now addressed close to fifty men. ‘The men who

attacked the Spa didn't know who we are. One of them is a friend of mine.' He pointed at Pete. 'And he will be treated as such, so will the other men.' He wagged a warning finger around the group, guards glancing at each other.

'These men ... are good men, well trained ex-SAS soldiers just trying to make a living, by doing the stuff that men like us do.' He counted out the words with a chopping motion of his hand. 'Men ... like ... us.'

He waved a hand at the entire assembled group. 'If you lot were not here, where would you be? You'd be hiring yourselves out for work like this! Many people have been duped into attacking us because they were not told who we are. Don't ... take it ... personally! I don't.' He pointed at himself.

Pointing at the courtyard he said, 'British Intelligence were conned by the Yanks. Those mercenaries last week, they were conned by the people who sent them. Slaughtered, set up and left to die. You, gentlemen, should feel no anger towards these people. If they knew us, they would be our friends and allies.'

He paused, calming a little. 'In the future we will let the gunmen of the world know who we are. If they still attack us, knowing who we are, then they deserve everything they get.' He thumbed towards the courtyard. 'Like that fucking Swiss Minister who sold us out ... and that Yank who took Russian money.' He pointed at the group. 'They, gentlemen, are your enemies - not the foot soldiers they send. Not the pawns in the game.'

He took a sip of beer. Isolating the 'old dogs' he pointed them out. 'During the Gulf war, did we get angry at the foot soldiers?' He held out and upturned palm, a slight shrug. 'No. We got angry at the officers in charge, the arse-holes sending them our way.'

He sought out Pete in the crowd. ‘This man, and his buddy, are now on our side. They would have been all along if they knew about us. I want them to be treated with the respect they deserve, the bodies of the other two flown to their homes for their families. They were *soldiers*, just doing a job like you fucks.’

2

Beesely turned to Dame Helen, both now close to the computer monitor.

‘Quite the speech,’ Beesely proudly stated, reaching for a chocolate.

She nodded. ‘To quote a phrase, he’s not as stupid as he looks.’

Minister Blaum was shown in. Beesely stood. ‘Ah, Minister, we were just talking about you.’

‘That does not fill me with joy, Herr Beesely. You know, Switzerland used to be a quiet backwater.’ He faced Dame Helen.

‘This is Dame Helen, Director of British Intelligence.’

Blaum was surprised, leaning over and shaking her hand. ‘Are you well?’

‘I was in a car accident,’ she coldly stated. ‘I’ve been making use of your excellent Swiss health spas.’

‘Good,’ Blaum enthused. ‘How are you finding our country?’

She turned to Beesely. ‘Perhaps you should tell him.’

Blaum straightened and gave Beesely an unfriendly look.

‘Minister, we just had ... an incident, at the Spa up the road.’

‘Incident?’ Blaum pressed.

‘Well, four armed men attacked the place, took hostages...’

Blaum slumped into a chair, a hand on his eyes.

Dame Helen touched his arm. 'Don't worry, I feel like that most days around here. Have a chocolate.'

Blaum looked up as Beesely added, 'We shot them with an Apache attack helicopter. No civilian casualties, situation contained, guests compensated and moved to another hotel.' Beesely sat back down and pressed his phone. 'Tea and coffee please.' He faced Blaum. 'So, to business.' Blaum sighed as he took out notepad and paper. 'First, I think that I could get most, if not all, Jewish groups to stop any claims against Swiss banks.'

Blaum was visibly shaken. 'You can do this?'

'I think so, yes.'

'My ... God,' Blaum let out.

'Right, starting at the beginning. Before you ask, or anyone else tells you, we, K2, and our friends and associates around the world caused, hang on –' he glanced at his notes. '- a *one day shakeout* on the Dow Jones yesterday.'

'Really?' Blaum asked with a smile. 'How much did you make?'

Beesely straightened, frowning. He made eye contact with Dame Helen, who was equally as surprised.

Blaum glanced from face to face. 'What?'

'We thought the Swiss Government would be mad at as?'

Blaum shrugged. 'This kind of thing goes on all the time. Did Otto not say?'

'No,' Beesely said with a scowl. 'He didn't.'

'How much did you take them for?'

'A lot. But we used it to buy controlling stakes in a lot of drug companies.'

'Are you going to squeeze that sector?'

Dame Helen eased forwards. 'If I was you, I'd go with your original thought, and put your head in your hands.'

Blaum darkened. 'Beesely?'

Tea and coffee was brought in. They waited.

Beesely began, 'I can't give you a complete picture, you would not sleep well.' Blaum's shoulders dropped. 'But that attack on us last week was not so much about the Russian, he was ... just the *opportunity* it afforded. The attack was to mask several Swiss bio-science companies being relieved of sensitive experiments and files.'

'My God, what did they get? Was it industrial espionage?'

Beesely held up hand, silencing him. 'The Americans are now no longer allowed to conduct certain experiments on US soil, so they are sub-contracted around the world.' He glanced at Dame Helen. 'These experiments were germ warfare.'

Blaum almost hit the roof. 'They were doing these experiments here?'

'Please, Minister, sit.'

Dame Helen said, 'I preferred him with his head in his hands.'

Beesely turned to her. 'You are not helping, young lady.' Addressing Blaum he said, 'Please, Minister, calm down. We have a lot to go through.' Blaum slumped. 'We are buying into the drug companies so that we can control what they work on and stop them.'

'That is what ... what the shakeout was for?'

'Yes. And now we have control of most of the companies that we want, and the Swiss bank Society has signed its voting rights to us. We have control, so we can stop it ... if it's not too late.'

'These germs, they are here?'

'No, Minister, and there is no risk of contagion. These germs need to be injected into people.'

Blaum was confused. Frowning he asked, 'Injected? What use are they as a weapon?'

‘It’s not that kind of weapon.’ Beesely gave Dame Helen a pained look. ‘We think they aim to contaminate World Health Organization immunisation programmes, so that the jabs given to people in the Middle East and elsewhere are tainted.’

Blaum sat staring out of focus. ‘They are all shipped through Geneva,’ he quietly stated.

‘Can you help get our people in place?’

Blaum nodded. ‘I have close personal friends in the World Health Organization. Whatever you need.’

Beesely observed the man’s pain. ‘OK,’ he softly began. ‘Moving right along. We are going to make a film about Swiss Secret Service and Counter Terrorism Teams, make everyone around the world think that Switzerland has a very strong intelligence service. That way ... they’ll think twice before attacking us.’

Blaum sullenly nodded. ‘Seems a good idea.’ He sipped his coffee.

‘That reminds me,’ Beesely muttered. He pressed CALL.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Get me Duncan, London.’

They waited.

‘Duncan here, awake for a change.’

‘Get yourself, and a good photographer that you can trust, and get over here pronto, domestic flight. You’ll be met at the airport. Bye.’ He pressed END.

‘What was that?’ Helen asked.

‘Friendly reporter. Going to run a story on just how tough Swiss security is. Minister, cheer up, we are going to win this.’

Blaum blew out. ‘What else?’

‘Just back us up when we need it. And in the meantime, keep up the story about how happy we are with the CIA. Hang around upstairs if you will, may need you a

bit more today. Have some food, use a room, shower, relax - you look worn out.'

Blaum slowly stood, bowed his head at Dame Helen and left.

'Poor guy,' Helen stated, popping a chocolate into her mouth. 'He has to clean up after you.'

3

Johnno limped into the restaurant damp from his shower, wearing a t-shirt, jeans and nothing on his feet, Pete trailing behind. He raised a finger to the catering staff. 'Two teas, plate of doughnuts, love.'

Patrick and Susan had pushed together three tables and were sitting with their files, plus an assortment of cups and plates. Mike sat reading a book near a window.

'Christ, Johnno,' Susan began, concerned. 'You look worse than this morning.'

A doctor and nurse walked briskly in. Johnno ignored them as he sat and they set about checking him, earning some strange looks.

'There was a gun battle up the road,' he casually informed them, wincing at a cut in his scalp as it was examined. The nurse handed the doctor a tube of cream and a medical staple-gun.

'Gun battle! Were you hurt?' Susan asked, standing.

'Ricochet, just little bits of masonry. Oh, this is Pete, we served together in the Paras and SAS.'

She politely introduced herself, as did Patrick. Mike waved.

'Where're the sprogs?' Johnno asked as opaque plasters were placed onto cuts on his hands and face, now being attended to like a boxer in the ring.

'The great invention of computer games,' Susan explained. 'Followed quickly behind by the great

invention of unlimited TV channels. They spend a lot of time down in your place, the dungeon.'

'I removed all the offending items, guns and grenades.' Susan shot him a look. He raised his hands. 'I'm Joking. It's all safe.'

'Your boy Thomas is in his element,' Patrick explained.

Johno smiled to himself. 'Thomas organizing, is he?'

Susan rolled her eyes. Pete finally sat as teas were brought out.

'How goes the war?' Mike asked from the corner.

'Good,' Johno answered. 'We're getting ahead. Your dear lady wife seems to be in her element, it's certainly taken her mind off things.' Johno immediately regretted that last statement, looking pained.

'It's OK,' Mike quietly suggested. 'You don't need to feel bad - I'm quite happy she's busy and involved. Moping around in hospitals wasn't doing her any good. She doesn't have time to think here.'

Johno nodded. 'That's not registering as a good thing, but I know what you mean.'

Blaum wandered in, placed down his briefcase and asked for a whisky.

'Tough day for someone?' Johno asked without looking around, checking his watch.

Blaum stepped closer. 'Were you hurt in the ... *incident*?'

Pete kept quiet, his head lowered. Johno answered, 'Just ricochet.' Then called, 'Herr Blaum, what's your first name?'

'Max.'

'Can I ask a favour, Max?'

'What is that, Johno?'

'See that fella in the corner with the book, can you take him for a stroll around the grounds, and tell him the story

of your family.’ Johno finally twisted his head around up, holding a serious expression.

Blaum stood solid for a moment, glancing at Mike before turning back to Johno.

‘Mike,’ Johno called whilst still fixed on Blaum. ‘Your indulgence please.’

Curious, Mike marked his page and stepped over.

Blaum glanced at the back of Johno’s head then gulped down his drink. ‘I could do with a walk.’ They left.

‘What was that all about?’ Susan asked.

The doctor curtly informed Johno that he was OK and left with the nurse.

‘Interesting fella, Herr Blaum,’ Johno began. ‘He’s their equivalent of a Home Secretary ... and he’s had quite a life. Lost two daughters ten years apart, adopted four times. Now he heads up their adoption programme and a lot of children’s charities around the world.’

Susan glanced at Patrick.

Johno added, ‘And he tried to hide from us the fact that the youngest adopted nearly died from meningitis recently, right in the middle of all the troubles. Kid is not out of danger and may be blind and paralysed. When it comes to bereavement counselling - that guy’s an expert.’

‘We may have something,’ Patrick suggested, changing the subject. ‘These manifests don’t include aircrews, nor do they included military flights, nor stuff like DHL.’

‘Good point. Grab a manager or two, get them onto it. Run with the ball guys, we ain’t short of resources. Shit, that reminds me.’ He grabbed the phone on the side of the food counter. ‘Get me RAF Marham, Flight Lieutenant McNamara. Say it’s a family matter to get through the switch board.’ He waited.

‘McNamara here.’

‘Johno here.’

‘Thank God. I was beginning to think I had a family that I had forgotten about.’ They laughed. ‘How was the intel?’ the officer enquired.

‘Good, check your bank account in the morning.’

‘No need for that, Johnno.’

‘Trust me, we have more than we know what to do with.’

‘Always welcome, then.’

‘Any other bits of intel’, get on the blower,’ Johnno requested.

‘So what happened?’

Johnno glanced at Pete. ‘We hit them with an Apache, two down unfortunately, but two ... converted.’

‘Apache? Shit!’

‘It does have an effect on people. You stay in touch, Rupert.’

* * *

Pepi read the report, laughing. Maria stepped in, puzzled by the laughter. She approached, a question in her expression.

‘K2 have put out a story, labelling the CIA as heroes, thanking the American President for their assistance in foiling the attack on K2. It lets the Americans off the hook, diverts attention away from the men involved with the germ warfare. Brilliant. I like this man Beesely, and they way he thinks.’

4

Bambitou sat next to Tracey with a sigh. ‘Hey Dick.’

She gave him one of her looks, before noticing the hoard of papers he now held. ‘Bored, were you?’

‘I wish. You’ve seen these?’ He plonked them down on the side of her desk.

She scanned the top paper, images of Switzerland. ‘Yeah, some. And CNN this morning. Why? Is it connected?’

‘I got a tip-off. It’s a pile of hooey.’

She puzzled that statement. ‘So they’re not heroes, then?’

‘What does the military do when one of their boys fucks up and goes all Rambo?’

‘Bury him with a medal, cover up the truth?’

‘Right,’ he let out. ‘So these six shits get a medal and their own private cover-up.’

She gave him a quizzical look, almost a smile. ‘What are you going to do?’

‘Don’t know yet. But I may have a source.’

‘Hell, it’s not as if you enjoy the job. *So what* if they boot you out.’

He straightened and smiled. ‘Always the optimist.’

‘Hmmm, let’s see. Special Agent Bambitou, forty-eight with a bad back ... and even worse attitude, or the Pentagon. Place your bets, ladies and gentlemen.’

‘Hey, I’m forty-seven! For another week.’

‘Aw, bless. You enjoy it. Oops, nearly forgot.’ She handed him a CD. ‘What’s your taste in snuff videos?’

‘Snuff videos? Not my department, thankfully.’

‘This is interesting,’ she said waving the CD. ‘American mercenary, getting tortured ... to death.’

‘What’s interesting, babes? He get caught some place like Iraq?’

‘Nope. Right at the beginning of the video you can hear, *welcome to Switzerland*.’

His eyes slowly widened. ‘An American mercenary ... getting caught and tortured in sunny Switzerland? Our

airport stiff had signs of torture, so did one of the Long Island gang.'

'Somebody after something,' she commented with a flick of her hair, returning to her computer screen. 'Oh, I didn't watch the CD, but they say he was *not* asked any questions. This was punishment.' He stepped to the door and turned. 'What?' she whispered when she noticed him watching her.

'Any more 'Oh'?'

She pursed her lips. 'Nope. That's it.' He turned. 'Oh, Boss was asking for you.'

He smiled to himself as he left.

Reconciling dockets

1

Otto stepped into Beesely's office with several files. He sat down promptly and placed the files on the desk, organizing them into groups. Dame Helen wheeled herself closer to the desk, grabbing a chocolate.

'Are we all sorted?' Beesely asked, straightening and taking off his glasses.

'A week's work in a few hours,' Otto firmly pointed out, his expression reflecting his self praise and pride in his work.

Beesely's cheek creased into a hidden smile. 'And?'

'We have balanced all the stock transactions, options and futures from yesterday. We are close to forty million euro better off from the directional trades. That sum is available to be spent as cash.'

'Good,' Beesely enthused. 'What else?'

'We bought a lot of drug stock. It has increased in value already and its shortage continues to cause the rise, almost fifteen percent overnight.'

'Shortage?' Beesely puzzled.

Otto carefully explained, unwrapping a chocolate. 'If the availability of a stock is not so great, the price increases. Supply and demand.'

Beesely lowered his head, a puzzled expression taking hold. 'So it's going up ... simply because we bought a lot of it?'

'Yes. What we bought is now worth two billion euro more than when we started, if it was sold now.'

'But if we sold it all now ... ' he held up his hand to pause Otto and checked his notes. Reading carefully he

slowly stated, 'The increased liquidity ... would cause it to fall ... before we could sell it at a good price?'

'Correct,' Otto said with a smile. 'You win a chocolate.'

Beesely glanced at the near empty tin, a quick frown, then turned to Dame Helen. 'I find it all fascinating.'

Otto added, 'The Society has bought enough so that we, and the American groups, can take control of many companies that we are interested in. There are already many news stories about this.'

'I want at least one K2 man well placed in each one!' Beesely firmly ordered with a pointed finger. 'One of those ... investment banker chaps.'

'It is being organized. The one thing we are not short of ... is bankers!'

Beesely and Helen both laughed.

'Sir,' buzzed from the phone.

'Yes.'

'The Society is here.'

'Show them down here, please. Tea and coffee.'

'You should have a canteen right there,' Dame Helen suggested, pointing at the far wall.

'What *is* next door?' Beesely asked Otto after glancing at the wall.

'File store room,' he informed them with a slight shrug.

'Move it. Small kitchen and toilet in there.' Then, as an afterthought Beesely asked, squinting at Otto, 'Is that practical?' Otto nodded and made a note.

Three Society members stepped in a minute later, one whom Beesely recognised, Otto greeting them all warmly.

Beesely walked around the desk and greeted them all personally in turn as well. 'This is Dame Helen, the head of British Intelligence,' he announced finally. They were mildly surprised, if not concerned, as they sat. Beesely

noticed. He caught her eye as he walked back around his desk, stating, 'She very kindly arranged for rumours to be spread in the British and American stock markets. Helped us a lot yesterday.'

The visitors brightened a little as tea as coffee was brought in.

'You have the accident?' their spokesman asked her, heavily accented.

'Car crash, but I'm OK,' she quickly and curtly got out, her injuries now an inconvenience and suddenly feeling self-conscious of her appearance.

'OK, gentlemen, first things first. I think we can get the International Jewish Congress to stop any Holocaust claims.'

They glanced at each other, surprised. 'That would be... most helpful,' their spokesman cautiously offered.

'But I may need some favours in return. That will come later. And those favours will not be conditional, as before. So, how did you do yesterday?'

'We had a good day on the markets,' they admitted.

'Excellent. And you are happy to sign over voting rights on the drug stocks?'

'We are,' their spokesman said with a slight bow of his head.

'I want one of your people, alongside one of ours, on the board of each company.'

'It is no problem. This is something we do every day. We are the best in the world at this.'

Beesely smiled. 'I do like a confident man.'

'It is correct,' Otto proudly offered.

'Can you, Otto, take these gentlemen to the trading room and make sure that we have everything as precise and efficient as a Swiss bank.'

Otto stood, collecting his files. 'Our solicitors and the other bank solicitors are here already, along with government solicitors.'

Beesely's brow furrowed. 'Government solicitors?'

'With transactions of this size it is normal,' Otto informed him, very matter of fact. Beesely stood as they left.

'Another round of tea and coffee that no one managed to touch!' Dame Helen pointed out, Beesely trying one of the coffees.

'Sir,' buzzed from the phone.

'Yes.'

'David from The Lodge, sir.'

'OK, put him through.'

'Beesely?'

'Yes, David. How are you on this fine day?'

'May I enquire if you were dabbling in the stock markets yesterday?'

'You don't need to enquire, David, you can just come straight out and ask.'

'So what's going on ... exactly?'

'We *shook out* the Dow Jones then accumulated drug stock. We now have control of most the drug and bio-science companies that were involved in Project Darwin, across Europe and the States. War with money, David. War ... with money!'

'What are you planning on doing with these companies?'

'Simply keeping an eye on projects, suspicious or otherwise. Nothing more complicated than that.'

'What about our stem-cell research projects?'

'I have no problem with genuine research for medicine. It's the other kind I have a problem with, and so do you ... I am sure. So your Government's investments are quite safe. The genuine ones I mean.'

‘You may attract attention from the rogue units, Beesely.’

‘What, like large-scale commando attacks? I think David, that you will find my defences ten times stronger than before and my ability to reach anyone, *anywhere*, has been increased a hundredfold.’

There was a pause at the other end. ‘Sounds as if you’re planning on becoming a player?’ came the concerned voice.

‘Tell me, David, did The Lodge spot the Darwin project? Did they stop it being sold to the Russians?’

There was a long silence. ‘We took our eye off the ball with that one.’

‘Fine, I will help to keep you focused in future. I will... bring things to your attention.’

‘Sure you don’t want to be chairman?’

‘Positive. And now you know exactly what I am up to. To quote a phrase - *always doing the right thing!*’

‘Well, we’re all very grateful for how you helped the President. Some quarters obviously not so happy about recommending those *guys* for medals. Talk about playing a joke. Christ, President wants to meet them!’

‘I want to meet them as well. Is that something that a man of your calibre can assist with?’

‘Two are dead for sure. We altered the credit card details as best we could, removed the child porn - for obvious reasons. CIA took the money. They’re on the run, six *other* men being presented to the President next week.’

‘And what of the puppet masters for these six? Same puppet master that tried to kill Johnno a few hours go?’

There was another pause. ‘What? Is he alright?’

‘Fine. We chopped up some more of the bad guys. Getting rather good at it now. All things considered, I think the man with the pistol was a tad surprised to find himself being shot at by an Apache! So, what of the

puppet master? Henry is dead, and yet we have a fresh attempt.'

'We're having trouble pinning it down.' David sounded both apologetic, and uncertain of many things.

'The chairman should not have trouble with such matters, he never used to!' Beesely suggested.

'Times have changed, more splinter groups, more departments,' came the flimsy excuse.

'Groups within groups, lies on top of lies.'

'It's been said before,' David joked, sounding unsure of himself.

'I will investigate, David. Do not ... get in my way.'

'You have seniority ... you are entitled to. I will help where I can.'

'Have a nice day,' Beesely mocked. He hung up with a finger stabbing at the button.

'What was all that about?' Dame Helen enquired, a concerned tone. 'I've heard this 'Lodge' name before.'

Beesely sat back, staring out of focus, past her and out of the open door. 'Best not to enquire, my dear.' Then he carefully mouthed, 'Dangerous.'

'Groups within groups,' she repeated with a sigh, scowling at no one in particular.

'Which reminds me.' He pressed CALL. 'Do we have people in South Africa?'

'Yes, sir. They are going after the man who hired the Spa attackers.'

'Good. Listen, I want to buy an influential share in *all* South African security companies involved with mercenaries.' He pressed END. 'With a bit of luck we can track back from this South African. I doubt it, but we may get lucky.' He lifted the near empty chocolates tin.

'Why on earth are you involved in the Jewish Congress claims against Swiss banks?' she enquired.

‘Good job you reminded me.’ He pressed CALL. ‘Elle Rosen, Mossad, London.’

Dame Helen raised an eyebrow.

‘Beesely?’ came from the phone.

‘Yes, how are you, Elle?’

‘That is the first time you have enquired. Normally you tell me that some big problem is happening!’

Dame Helen laughed, earning a reproachful glance from Beesely.

‘Listen, small favour, Elle. Could you ask the International Jewish Congress if they wouldn’t mind ... dropping any Holocaust claims against the Swiss?’

‘What?’ Elle shrieked. ‘What are you asking? In your position you should be helping us with those claims! You’re on the inside!’

‘I *am* helping,’ Beesely firmly insisted. ‘I am helping to get you and the CIA ... *a prize more valued.*’

There was a pause. ‘Do you mean what I think you mean?’ Elle enquired.

‘Yes, so be patient. I’ll send you two hundred million dollars for the families. Hell, it’s probably some of their money anyway.’

‘Not so funny, my friend.’

Beesely took a breath. ‘Just do as I ask, Elle. And I think you will find a lot of pressure on you from the President to the same effect.’

‘I have been watching the American news. Sometimes I think you are just the bit crazy. Then a day later ... just the bit brilliant.’

‘Elle, I make it up as I go along, you know that. Will you make the call?’

‘I’ll make the call. It’s not like I need friends in the world.’

‘Good, good.’

‘And Beesely, some day you just call to say hi, eh?’
The line went dead.

‘I’m sticking with crazy,’ Helen offered.

‘You may be right, my dear,’ he sighed. ‘You may be right.’

‘So, coming back to my original question, what’s this Jewish stuff all about?’

He glanced at the doorway. ‘The men you met earlier are from the secret Swiss banker’s Society, it dates back three hundred years odd. They tend to choose Swiss Federal Presidents or kill the ones they don’t like. They have a lot of financial clout, not so much firepower. I’ve made friends with them.’

She tipped her head. ‘And?’

‘And if I have the key to the door I could remove the funds of most of the world’s terrorists and organized crime lords overnight. Iranians have money here, so do the North Koreans, Syrians, Saddam’s family is said to have an account with ten billion dollars in. IRA had accounts, ETA, Red Brigade - you name them.’

‘But how would the Swiss react?’

‘Not well, it would destroy a chunk of their economy.’

‘So they won’t give it up!’

‘Not all of it, no. And they may get very upset with K2 if we pry.’

She rubbed her aching leg. ‘Delicate.’

Beesely sat back. ‘But they did help me liberate some stolen EU funds from Nigerian politicians.’

‘Did the Nigerians complain to the Swiss Government?’ His look suggested that they were in no position to complain. ‘Oh,’ she added, a disapproving stare.

‘Thing is, we don’t want to stop the world’s terrorists using Switzerland. We just want a peek up their skirts once in a while.’

‘How eloquently phrased. You, sir, have been spending too much time around Johnno.’

Snappers and scribblers

1

‘Ah, Duncan, come in,’ Beesely enthused as the reporter appeared in the doorway. He stood and gestured Duncan and his visibly nervous photographer to seats. ‘Good flight down?’

‘Hour and a bit,’ Duncan commented. ‘Took longer to get to bloody Heathrow and queue up.’ A guard waited just inside the doorway.

Beesely focused on the photographer, a welcoming smile. ‘You the snapper?’

‘Yes,’ the man coughed out, glancing around the room and wondering what he had got himself into.

‘Good. Right, this is what I want - oh, any problems with stories about ... you know what?’

‘Some,’ Duncan answered. ‘But all dealt with. It’s a well-oiled machine now, Sir Morris. And ... on occasion I take your name in vain. Had this chap sniffing around, asking questions about me, so I told him he should talk to you. He was some kind of spook, MI5 or whatever. Soon as I mentioned your name he legged it.’

Beesely made quick eye contact with Helen. ‘Excellent. Right, your assignment, gentlemen.’ Otto walked in and sat, notepad and paper in hand. ‘You remember Otto?’

‘Yes,’ Duncan offered with a forced smile for Otto.

‘Right. Around here you will find lots of good photo opportunities. There is the training camp you saw on the way in - lots of soldiers and guns. There are the mountains and some training facilities in the hills, ask for a list of facilities and make sure that you don’t miss anything.’

He gestured with thrusting hand. 'Your objective is to make the Swiss counter terrorism services look like they can take on the world ... and win!'

Duncan nodded his understanding, his photographer less sure of things.

Beesely continued, 'Of course, all photos and finished article to be checked by us first.' He waved dismissively. 'You'll be strip searched at the end, anyway.' The photographer now looked even more worried. Beesely added, 'You'll be billeted up the road, health spa, very nice, no chit-chat with the locals, but enjoy your stay. Oh, don't forget our squadron of Apache attack helicopters, we'll get you up in one, a few pictures from inside.'

'They the ones that helped in the attack on this place?' Duncan asked.

'No. They were Americans, based in Southern Germany. These we bought afterwards.'

'You bought a squadron of Apaches?' Duncan repeated, wide eyed. 'What ... they were second-hand on eBay?'

Otto smiled.

'E ... bay?' Beesely queried.

Otto informed him, 'Internet shopping website.'

'Ah. No. Kind of hard to explain. Officially they are Swiss Army.' He tapped his nose. 'So, any questions?'

'What angle on the story?' Duncan asked.

Beesely eased back. 'Secret Swiss security services, bank security etc., along the lines of ... they don't generally show off, but after the large scale bank robbery attempt they allowed you in, etc.'

'Gotcha. No problem. What timescale, Boss?'

'No hurry. Hang around a couple of days. Bonus for a good job.'

* * *

Patrick walked in with Susan, their expressions suggesting they had something of interest.

‘DHL dead heads!’ Patrick announced, holding a sheet of paper.

Beesely curled a lip. ‘What are those?’

‘DHL, a parcel carrier,’ Patrick explained.

‘Ah, I see.’

‘And *dead heads* is a term Johnno said was for pilots who don’t fly, just catch a lift.’

‘Spare pilots?’ Beesely enquired, dryly. ‘In case one breaks down?’

Patrick smiled. ‘No, just catching a lift, re-positioning themselves around the world so they can take other aircraft someplace.’

‘And they are linked in?’

‘Three of them,’ Susan put in. ‘All linked to the original six, hotels and restaurants in Germany, some in Switzerland.’

Beesely puzzled that statement. ‘Are we saying the CIA use these pilots as agents?’

‘Why not?’ Dame Helen challenged. ‘They fly all around the world and no one ever suspects them. Stopovers in many places.’

‘Seems plausible,’ Beesely agreed, making a face. ‘So what do we have?’

Patrick handed him the sheet as Otto entered.

Beesely glanced at the sheet then lifted it up for Otto. ‘Some DHL parcel pilots tied in somehow.’

‘There is a DHL Captain and a regional manager at the spa,’ Otto informed them, now concerned. ‘They were questioned by the police this morning.’

Beesely stood. ‘I want our friends in the police to pick them up, bring them here, through the rear entrance.’ Otto stepped quickly out.

‘Sir,’ buzzed from the phone.

‘Yes?’

‘An Apache has landed outside, sir.’

‘Did we ask an Apache to land outside?’

‘Herr Johno asked for it, sir.’

‘OK.’ He pressed END as Johno ambled in.

Beesely made eye contact. ‘There’s an Apache here?’

‘Visual aid,’ Johno stated as he checked the Quality Street chocolate tin.

‘Visual aid?’ Beesely repeated.

‘For anyone watching this place,’ Johno added, slumping in a chair.

‘Ah, right. Scare the buggers. We’ve tied in some DHL pilots to the group of six and there were two DHL chaps at the spa.’

Johno straightened, keenly interested. ‘Where’re they now?’

‘Otto is arranging for the police to grab them.’

Johno nodded, looking tired. He lifted his head to Susan, now stood alongside Dame Helen. ‘What was the trouble earlier with your sprogs?’

‘Trouble?’ Beesely repeated, immediately concerned.

Susan reluctantly began, ‘Son of one of the builders - can’t be more than eighteen. He caught the eye of my eldest.’

‘And Susan,’ Johno stated gleefully, ‘*tactful* as she is, told the young lad she’d cut his bollocks off if he looked at her girl again.’

Beesely sighed. ‘Christ, we’ve upset the builders enough of late! Did he do anything other than simply *look*?’

‘No,’ Susan reluctantly admitted. ‘But she’s like a dog on heat, and we have enough problems as it is.’

Johno lifted the now-empty chocolates tin and shook it, giving Beesely a knowing look.

‘God, yes. What’s that girl’s name again?’

‘Adrianne,’ Johnno informed him.

Beesely tapped his phone. ‘Is that you, Adrianne?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Can you pop in, please?’ He pressed END. ‘Susan, if you don’t mind we need a good working relationship with our builders. We tend to wreck the place - often!’ Susan glanced around the faces, not knowing what she had done wrong.

Adrianne knocked and stepped just inside the door. ‘Sir?’

Beesely waved her in. ‘What’s the name of the son of the builder working today?’

‘Otto, sir,’ she nervously answered. ‘He’s one of my brothers.’

Johnno shot Susan a look.

‘Oh,’ Beesely let out. ‘Er ... well earlier, Susan here –’ he gestured. ‘- may have been a little ... *loud* with him. You see, her daughter likes your brother ... and Susan, the daughter’s ... mother ... did not want her daughter involved with an older boy.’

‘I’m sure he did not mean anything, sir,’ Adrianne nervously apologised. ‘He has a girlfriend.’

Otto walked back in.

‘Does he? Good. I mean, that’s good for him. Please tell your father that the boy –’

‘Otto,’ his namesake quietly put in.

‘- is not in any kind of trouble, but that it may be wise for him to work elsewhere whilst Susan’s daughter is here, if you understand.’

Adrianne smiled slightly. ‘Yes, sir. I understand.’

‘There’s plenty of work at the spa,’ Johnno sarcastically pointed out.

‘Yes,’ Beesely said with a sigh and forced smile. ‘Plenty of work at the spa. And thanks again for the chocolates.’

Johnno stood and walked up to Adrienne, leaning in and tapping his cheek with a finger.

‘Do you need another band-aid, sir?’ she asked with a frown.

Beesely laughed. ‘That will be all, young lady. Thank your father for me for all his hard work.’ She trotted out, smiling. He faced Johnno. ‘Your technique needs work.’

2

Twenty minutes later the DHL pilot and his manager arrived, having been driven through the camp; past the guards, past the ex-SAS and then deliberately past the Apache. Finally they were taken through the tunnel and the lower bunker before arriving at Beesely’s office via the walkway, now suitably *prepped*.

Guards pushed them into two chairs arranged in front of the desk. Johnno sat on the cabinet, MP5 in hand, Otto stood nearby. Dame Helen’s wheelchair rested close to Beesely, Patrick and Susan sitting off to one side.

The pilot offered a handsome image; tall, fit and dark haired, a hint of grey in front of his ears. The older man was stocky, thinning on top and had a few days growth of stubble. They both wore casual jackets over t-shirts and jeans. Their DHL IDs were placed on the desk by a guard.

Beesely had been writing when the two men had been seated. A good twenty seconds later he put down his pen, looked up and took off his glasses. He regarded them for a moment then eased back into his chair. ‘You, gentlemen, are conspicuously quiet. No protesting, no requesting of your embassy?’

‘Would it do any good?’ the older man finally asked, a distinct American drawl.

‘Might do. Do you have any friends in high places?’

‘Yes, and they’ll be looking for us. This is the first place they’ll look.’

‘Really? Gosh, guess we will have to make sure we hide your bodies well.’

The pilot looked less than certain about the older man’s stoic approach, Beesely noticing. ‘What are you, CIA?’

‘Yes,’ the older man claimed, snarling. ‘And you’ll pay a heavy price for screwing with us.’

Beesely reached across and grabbed the DHL IDs. He tapped CALL. ‘What time is it in Washington right now?’

‘6am, sir.’

‘Get me the director of the CIA, at home. What’s his name again?’

‘George Holmes, sir.’

The pilot fixed his eyes on the phone as they waited.

‘Hello?’ came from the desk phone, a deep American accent.

‘George Holmes?’

‘Yes, who’s this?’

‘Sir Morris Beesely, calling from K2 headquarters in Switzerland. Did I wake you?’

‘Beesely? Yes, you woke me, but never mind, if you need to call me then do so. Anytime.’

‘That’s good to know, George. May I call you George?’

‘Yes, of course. Have you spoken to the President?’

‘No, not yet. Can you tell him on my behalf that it may be better than he does not try and speak directly with me, he needs *plausible deniability* should I ... you know.’

‘Yes, I fully understand. Good idea, I’ll call him later.’

‘Listen, small problem. Couple of your chaps sat opposite me as we speak, they tried to kill me this morning.’

‘What? We haven’t sanctioned any such action, and given who you are - why the hell would we? You’re on our team!’

‘Well, seems as if someone in your outfit *does not* know that.’

‘Who are these men?’ Holmes demanded.

‘They are masquerading as DHL pilots and managers.’

‘What are their names?’

‘The senior individual is down as Thierry O’Donoghue, DHL manager for Germany.’

‘Hold on a second, I’m going to make a call on my mobile.’

They waited. The pilot began glancing at the older man, the manager himself now losing most of his defiance.

‘Beesely, you there?’

‘Yes, still here.’

‘His real name is Martin Preston –’ the man visibly winced. ‘- Deputy Section Chief, Berlin.’

‘So why, pray tell, is he trying to kill me?’

‘He shouldn’t be, this is not sanctioned from above.’

‘Who is he answering to?’

‘Section Chief, Berlin, then European Section Head Langley in an ideal world. I’ll be launching a full-scale enquiry as soon as I get in, recalling the German Chief, you can be assured of that.’

‘I can’t ask for more than that, George. What would you like me to do with this pair?’

‘I’ll arrange a military transport for them, if that’s OK with you?’

Beesely eased back. ‘Well, K2 has a reputation to maintain. We would normally torture and execute them,

then dispose of the bodies as we usually do. I am playing a role, after all.'

There came a stunned silence from the other end. 'There would be a lot of awkward questions, they'll be missed.'

'Well, maybe just one of them then. The pilot is not a Deputy Section Chief.'

'My official position is that we want them, I can't deviate from that, you know that as well as I do.'

'Very well, I will give it some thought. Pop over at some point, I'll show you around.' He hung up. Beesely made eye contact with Mr. Martin Preston. 'He doesn't have a clue, does he?'

'He's a political appointee,' Preston said with venom. 'Just a figure head. Real work goes on around him.'

Beesely glanced at the side of Dame Helen's head. 'Some of the people in this room might take exception to that view of how the head of an intelligence organization should be treated.' Dame Helen had not responded, she was still fixed on the man. 'Well, I can't just hand you over and let you run around telling people how soft I am with prisoners. But if I kill you he will be annoyed, and I have no wish to annoy him.'

'I want to cut a deal,' the pilot reluctantly stated.

Preston snapped his head towards the pilot. 'Talk and we go after your family,' he hissed.

Susan was on her feet in an instant, Preston half-standing and turning as if to attack the pilot. She caught him with a left uppercut and sent him flying backwards over the chair, out cold before he hit the floor. Guards rushed in, holding the pilot and grabbing the unconscious Section Chief.

'Good God, Susan,' Dame Helen let out.

Beesely made eye contact with Johnno, cocking and eyebrow. 'She's a Beesely all right.' He turned to the

guards. 'Get a doctor for him, we don't want him dying on us,' he quietly ordered. 'Then hold him in the chair room, without harm, but show him *all* of our nice videos.'

Three guards carried him out, two guards now stood behind the pilot, hands on his shoulders and preventing him from standing.

'So, mister pilot, you want to *cut a deal*, as the Yanks like to say.'

The pilot frowned. 'I *am* a Yank.'

Beesely made a face, feeling foolish. 'So what do you know?'

'He was trying to kidnap either you or your son,' the pilot explained.

Dame Helen turned. 'Your son?' Johno winked at her without the pilot noticing. 'Oh,' Dame Helen let out. 'That explains a lot.'

The pilot glanced at her, none the wiser, adding, 'They wanted to ransom either of you for something, something very valuable.'

Beesely appeared as if he was about to say something, then hesitated. 'Something of great value? What?' He glanced at Otto, who appeared surprisingly nervous all of a sudden.

'I don't know,' the pilot added.

Beesely turned fully to Otto. 'Ransom me for K2 cash? Bank cash?'

'I would not hand it over,' Otto flatly stated. Beesely stared at him. Otto added, 'Would you wish me to, knowing that you would probably be dead anyway?'

'No, I wouldn't ever expect to be ransomed. And K2 is more valuable *with* its cash, more valuable than me and my son together.'

Johno sarcastically stated, 'Those two ain't worth two bent pennies!'

‘Yes, quite. So what do we have of great value?’ he posed, Otto shifting uneasily on his seat.

The pilot added eagerly, ‘He reckoned it was worth trillions, whatever it was.’

Otto quickly put in, ‘That is stupid.’

Beesely made eye contact with Otto. ‘Access to the Society?’

Otto shook his head. ‘They will co-operate only when it suits them.’

‘Buried treasure?’ Johno asked with a smirk whilst focused on Otto. ‘Oil under the lake?’

‘Something about oil, and something hidden in a vault,’ the pilot said. ‘Preston kept saying, *it’s all about oil.*’

Otto was visibly relieved.

Beesely eased back, holding his gaze on Otto. ‘If it’s about Middle East oil then we can’t help. And it’s not like we have the virus, so we can’t ransom it.’ He faced the pilot, getting annoyed. ‘What else?’

‘Not much. I’m not a full agent, I just help on the odd job, plus packages here and there.’

‘What did he talk about after a few drinks?’ Beesely asked.

‘Like I said, oil and more bloody oil - end of world scenarios - global warming, middle east, crap like that.’

Otto stood, very slowly, and turned to face Beesely, an expression Beesely had not seen before. ‘I believe I know what this is about. Why the CIA may have had old plans to attack Gunter, why they feared you coming here, why they wanted to ransom you - or someone you cared about.’ He turned to the guards, ‘Take him out.’ Next he turned to Susan, ‘Can you and Patrick take Helen upstairs, please.’

Susan and Patrick stood, but looked to Beesely for confirmation.

‘Please,’ Beesely requested as he stood.

‘We’re in this fight together,’ Susan protested.

‘Some things are more dangerous than others,’ Otto suggested. ‘Considering what I think this is about, I am very surprised we have not had dealings with the Americans before now.’

‘Please,’ Beesely repeated to Susan, a hand gesturing towards the door.

With a protesting huff Susan wheeled Dame Helen out. Patrick said ‘good luck’ and closed the door.

Oil under the lake?

1

Otto sat opposite Beesely, Johno sitting next to him.

‘So, what do you think they were after?’ Beesely keenly enquired.

‘Something Gunter had some foresight about, I hate to admit. I am surprised I did not think of it earlier, but Gunter had a great many ideas about many things. He had patents to several strange inventions.’

‘Christ,’ Johno quietly let out. ‘Not that fabled car engine that needs only a small drop of oil and some old cow shit?’

‘No,’ Otto informed him, a slight frown creasing his brow. ‘But we do have patents on many things that one day may be worth a lot of money. Including engines that are efficient, solar power and others. We must have a look at them soon.’

‘Solar power?’ Beesely asked with a frown. ‘That’s it?’

‘No,’ Otto answered. ‘It is oil.’

Johno wagged a finger and smiled. ‘See, there is oil under the lake.’

‘No, there is oil under the snow,’ Otto quietly informed Beesely.

‘Alaska?’ Beesely probed.

‘In part. Gunter had a number of dormant oil drilling rights and concessions.’

‘That could be worth that much?’ Beesely questioned.

‘Not today. And not for twenty years or more,’ Otto suggested.

‘That’s OK,’ Johno quipped. ‘Thomas will be old enough by then, running this place.’

‘It is not so much the joke,’ Otto said with a wry smile.

‘So what is it?’ Beesely asked.

‘Gunter has oil drilling and exploration concessions to an area of Northern Alaska. Up to ninety nine years after the contract date, 1937.’

‘So it has thirty years to run,’ Beesely considered. ‘In twenty years odd it will be worth more, but I don’t know about trillions. Getting oil out of the Arctic is tricky and expensive. Plus all the pollution and Greenpeace protestors - *save the seal*.’

‘Till there’s a shortage, then they just won’t give a shit,’ Johnno suggested, trying the last chocolate.

‘There is one thing you are forgetting,’ Otto teased them. ‘The other favourite topic of this man - global warming.’

‘Of course,’ Beesely exclaimed. ‘When the ice melts, getting at it should be a heck of a lot easier!’

‘So that’s what these Yanks are after, our mining rights to seal country?’ Johnno puzzled, a sceptical frown shot at Otto.

‘No,’ Otto stated.

‘No?’ Beesely repeated.

‘The mining rights in Alaska are, I believe, less than five percent of what Gunter acquired.’

‘Five percent!’ Johnno repeated. ‘FUCK ... ME!’

Beesely let his jaw drop. ‘What other rights does he have?’

Otto took a breath. ‘He has land and rights north of the current Canadian sand-oil fields.’

‘Which are mostly snow-bound at the moment,’ Beesely pointed out, thinking aloud.

‘Not for long,’ Johnno suggested. ‘Chinese are going to make sure of that! New frigging power station every week.’ He scrunched up the chocolate wrapper, flicking it upwards with a thumb and landing it into the tin.

‘How big are these fields?’ Beesely asked, an annoyed glance towards Johnno.

‘If I remember correctly, ten thousand square miles.’

‘Shit,’ Johnno let out, his eyes wide. Then he turned to Beesely. ‘Is that big for Canada?’

‘Not really. About a hundred miles square, not a large percentage of Canada, so I don’t know why they would want it. Very valuable yes, but not the Holy Grail. Hard land to work with small margins at the moment.’

Otto explained, ‘It is in the prime sand-oil belt. But this is not the most valuable, I think. I must do some research. The bank also has rights to areas of Northern Norway and an island off Norway.’

‘That got oil under it?’ Johnno asked.

‘Nobody knows,’ Otto suggested. ‘I do not think anyone has drilled these areas.’

‘So the potential could be huge,’ Beesely said to himself, staring out of focus. ‘Maybe the Americans know something we don’t about these oil fields.’

‘So we own the oil under the land?’ Johnno asked Otto.

Otto shook his head. ‘No. If, and when, it is agreed by the governments to drill those areas we would have the option of being the oil company doing the exploration and drilling, earning a percentage.’

‘Ah, so we don’t own the oil itself,’ Johnno considered. ‘We would be ... what ... the preferred contactor?’

Otto nodded. ‘The main area of interest, and what this is mostly about, is probably Greenland.’

‘Greenland?’ Beesely questioned. ‘Never heard of oil in Greenland. They looked in 1976 I think, didn’t find anything.’

‘It has only been theorised, and exploration is becoming a problem with the UN rights for ... the likes of Eskimos.’

‘UN Indigenous Peoples Rights,’ Beesely informed him, carefully pronouncing the words.

‘At the moment,’ Johno scoffed. ‘But when oil gets short they won’t give a fuck.’

‘What part of Greenland did Gunter buy?’ Beesely asked.

‘Most of the east coast. But I believe I read that the authorities are selling concessions on the west coast at present.’

‘So, we could be worth a bob or two if there is oil,’ Johno said as he stood and stretched. ‘Sweet. So why hasn’t anyone offered to buy this stuff from us?’

‘They do not know,’ Otto suggested. ‘Not about all of it.’

‘Someone does!’ Beesely snapped. ‘At least about a big part of it.’

‘The rights would be no use to them at the moment,’ Otto sullenly suggested.

‘Why?’ Beesely asked, noticing Otto’s expression.

‘There are government and UN treaties to protect the lands of the Eskimos - in Alaska, Canada, Norway and Greenland.’

Johno stared at Beesely for several seconds. ‘Unless you kill them with a virus first! Spread over the next twenty years.’

‘One genetically targeted!’ Beesely added, his shoulders dropping. ‘Making it all appear as if it’s a natural outbreak of flu. Or SARS virus.’

‘Lies on top of lies,’ Johno muttered, taking a beer from the fridge. ‘Could be worse, we could be sat on a fucking beach.’

Beesely ran a hand across his bald scalp. ‘Any bright ideas, boys?’

‘Yeah,’ Johno began. ‘The west needs oil, and by that I mean *us* as well, so why not let the Yanks or whatever drill the frigging oil? When the snow melts.’

Otto suggested, ‘When oil is short the Americans will take it by force, so too the Russians. The Russian Eskimos will not be a problem, same for Americans in Alaska.’

‘Unless common sense breaks out,’ Beesely quietly stated.

‘Hah!’ Johno scoffed, sipping his beer.

‘Well, we are not at that stage yet,’ Beesely pointed out. ‘We are here and now, and so far the governments in question, and the laws, are protecting these areas as much as the weather keeping people out. Once the tipping point is reached those oil rights won’t be worth anything. They are not worth much now, but between twenty and fifty years from now they may be worth a hell of a lot - just as it becomes economical to drill those areas *and not* politically worth pissing-off the UN.’

‘Greenland belongs to Denmark,’ Otto pointed out. ‘So the European Union will be up against the Americans if they break the law there.’

‘And the EU is just as hungry for oil as the States,’ Johno added. ‘So where does that leave us? Holding a hot potato, stuck between Europe and the US.’

‘We should sell the rights,’ Beesely suggested, with a dismissive wave. ‘Take the heat off us.’

‘To whom?’ Otto asked. ‘Which side?’

‘Neither side,’ Beesely began. ‘To an independent honest broker. Well, independent at least. Mostly.’

‘The Society!’ Otto exclaimed.

‘Who else? They have the money and the neutrality. No one else could handle it, unless it was sold to a government. They also have deep dark vaults.’

‘Why not sell the Greenland concessions back to Denmark?’ Johno suggested.

‘All for Switzerland ... may be the best option,’ Beesely insisted, earning a puzzled look from Otto. ‘Otto, let’s find some answers to some questions. Are the Society people still here?’

‘Yes, their trading delegation. But it will take time to review the documents.’

‘OK, let’s say tomorrow at 2pm. Have the documents checked and summarised overnight, then we ask an oil expert to value them.’

Otto nodded. ‘We have many top oil traders and analysts, they can make an estimate. I will arrange this.’ He stepped out.

‘So,’ Johnno began with a sigh, ‘Once we’re shot of the hot potato we let the Yanks know about it?’

‘Oh, yes,’ Beesely firmly agreed. ‘Then we can tackle the idiots with the virus.’

Johnno stood. ‘Right, got a car to take back.’

Beesely winced. ‘Good luck. Go armed!’

2

Beesely knocked on Dame Helen’s door, surprised to note the sounds of high-spirited and overlapping conversations coming from within. Mike answered the door.

‘Evening, Mike. Not disturbing ... am I?’

‘No, no, come on in.’

Beesely noted Mike’s pleasant demeanour as he entered, surprised to find Minister Blaum sat with his jacket off and his sleeves rolled up. ‘Minister?’ Beesely was caught off guard.

‘Evening, Beesely,’ Blaum responded with a smile. ‘I have taken a room, if that’s all right.’

Beesely quickly took in the scene; Tabitha was sat on the bed, Dame Helen in her wheelchair and looking a little

brighter. 'Of course it's all right, *you* ... are always welcome here.'

'That's what we figured,' Dame Helen mentioned. 'Dinner upstairs in a hour, we asked them for some decent chefs.'

'I do hope you did not word it like that!'

'No,' she smiled. 'We asked them about evening specialities and they showed a list of guest chefs.'

'Ah, yes. I remember now. Not easy to keep the kitchen staff happy.'

'Perhaps, Beesely, you should destroy the kitchen less often?' Blaum said with a smirk. 'They spend more time at home than they do here apparently.'

Beesely unhappily nodded his acceptance of that premise. 'We will need you tomorrow, Minister, along with your Federal President –' Blaum stopped smiling and straightened. '- and your government solicitors to witness something.'

'Some big deal?' Blaum enquired, stepping closer.

Beesely took a breath. 'Tens of billions.'

Blaum stopped dead, appearing suddenly mortified. 'Dear God, Beesely, what ... is worth that?'

Beesely glanced at Dame Helen, Mike now curious. 'Something hidden in a deep dark vault.' Blaum took a breath and held it, his pulse racing. 'The heart of this problem.' Blaum could feel his pulse in his neck. 'Oil.' Blaum breathed again.

'Oil?' Dame Helen puzzled.

'To quote the Berlin Deputy Section Chief, CIA - *it's all about oil and global warming!* Although I can't do the accent justice.'

'What oil?' Blaum pressed.

Beesely made strong eye contact. 'Before the Second World War Gunter bought, or obtained, some very useless oil concessions which have never been used. Seems we

have the rights to a large part of Alaska, Canada, Norway and Greenland.'

Blaum's jaw dropped. 'They could be priceless!'

'They could be worth nothing. But with global warming pushing back the ice and the price of oil rising, they could well be priceless.'

'What are you going to do with them?' Blaum asked in a strained whisper.

'Give them to the Swiss banking Society, under Swiss government supervision.'

Blaum stood frozen, temporarily immobilized and rooted to the spot, staring at Beesely.

Dame Helen turned her wheelchair towards Beesely. 'Will that stop their interest in you?'

'Partly, my dear, partly. Anyway, what is this chef like?'

'He's expensive,' Mike mentioned, as if that might be a problem.

Relieved, Blaum roared with laughter, turning to Mike. Even Helen laughed, Beesely joining in.

'Listen,' Beesely began. 'At dinner, let's try and not talk shop.'

'Got no argument there,' Dame Helen approved.

* * *

'There are police on every corner for five miles,' a guard commented, holding up a hand against the midday sun.

Johno had stepped out of the proceedings for a fag break at the drawbridge, squinting now in the bright sunlight and dressed in a suit. The ex-SAS teams were tucked away, the Apache gone. Security was very tight today, but also very tightly hidden.

The guard next to him questioned, 'All this for our President?'

‘No, the bank Society. Big deal going down, and things should be quieter after this.’

‘Take the war to them?’

Johno tipped his eyebrows up and down. ‘Hope so.’

The guard’s radio crackled into life. ‘Courtyard, Legal Party One leaving now.’

‘Roger.’ The guard pointed at two Range Rovers. They started up and moved forwards, two more moving up and taking their place, guards attending the car doors.

‘Stay sharp,’ Johno quietly ordered as he turned, heading back inside. He passed a group of suits near the lift, not knowing quite which group they were. Then he waited a full five minutes as more suits came down in the lift.

Thomas had protested, whinged, whined and generally tried everything to get out of putting his old bellhop costume on, finally bribed with hard cash. Now he busily shuttled guests in the lift, a less than friendly welcome for his sponsor. ‘Vanker,’ he muttered, loud enough for Johno to hear.

‘Wu ... wu-an-ker. Wanker,’ Johno corrected. Finally he arrived back in the restaurant, now a little stuffy with all the attendant warm bodies. He sought out Otto within the crowd. ‘All done and dusted?’ Johno whispered as he drew level, he and Otto now facing the centre of the crowd.

‘Done and dusted?’ Otto repeated with a curious frown. ‘I have heard this phrase, but do not know its meaning.’

‘Old days,’ Johno whispered out of the side of his mouth. ‘Ink from a bird’s feather, very wet, they threw dust on it to dry it quicker.’

‘Ah,’ Otto sighed. ‘Yes, papers signed and, more importantly, witnessed and photographed many times.’

‘So what deal was struck?’

Mathius, the bank's CEO, moved past and shook Johnno's hand briefly before moving off.

'Capital sum now, percentage of gross margin on oil-fields if pumping begins.'

'So, we richer than before?'

'Three times more. Not including any oil revenue.'

Johnno's eyes widened, carefully regarding his step-brother for a moment. 'If you were *really* Gunter's son, that would all be yours,' he whispered.

Otto considered the suggestion. 'Then I would not have had the pleasure of meeting you,' he whispered, a glint in his eye.

Johnno grinned from ear to ear. 'Vanker,' he muttered, the two of them laughing sedately.

The crowd started to clap. Without a clue as to what for, they both clapped as well. Using a break in the crowd, Johnno wiggled between suits towards Beesely, stopping a body distance behind him and back in bodyguard mode.

Blaum and his President were snuggling up to Beesely, photographs being taken by a K2 man. The Society were well represented, he could see, but not so keen on the photo album touch.

'How is you?' a heavily accented voice asked. Johnno turned to find the *old man* himself. He smiled and thrust a hand out, shaking the old man's cold and limp offering.

'Good, sir. Alles gute?'

'Yes. Your man Bis-el-ee is the strange-ed man.'

'That is so true,' Johnno agreed.

The old man placed a white hand on Johnno's shoulder then shuffled awkwardly past.

3

A long hour later Mike wheeled Helen into the restaurant, followed by Susan and Patrick. Beesely sat now with

Blaum, Johno, Otto and the bank's CEO Mathius, jackets discarded and ties loosened.

As Dame Helen drew near she said, 'I thought you agreed *not* to destroy the restaurant any more?'

They laughed and took in the scene around them; cups, plates, spilled drinks, bits of food, the floor littered with all sorts, the kitchen counter stacked ten deep with cups.

'Help yourselves to drinks,' Johno suggested. 'It's now self service – on account of the fact that the kitchen staff are *bleeding knackered*.'

Susan and Patrick sat. Mike pulled across a chair and sat near his wife as Thomas walked in muttering under his breath in German. He plonked down next to Johno, folded his arms and rested them on the tabletop, finally putting his chin on his arm.

'Hard day at the office?' Johno enquired, lowering his head, only to be ignored.

'All done and dusted?' Dame Helen enquired.

'I must remember this phrase,' Otto suggested, as much to himself as anyone else. Mathius asked for clarification, which Otto gave.

'Bloody hope so,' Beesely replied. 'Don't want to do that again.'

'How did it go?' she pressed.

'Well, I made proposals, then the solicitors chit-chatted away feverishly for five minutes, then a counter proposal, then another round of whispers, then the government lot whispering, then a provisional agreement - which would be scribbled down, then the next step. Bleeding exhausting.'

'For this money,' Otto began, 'in a short time, it is the miracle. It is the financial history.'

'It is true,' Mathius insisted. 'This negotiation should have taken one year!'

'A whole year?' Susan queried.

‘Yes,’ Mathius insisted. ‘But it was so important that everyone wanted it done today. But also the concession Herr Beesely offered the Society was conditional on a deal today.’

‘What was the deal?’ Susan asked. ‘If we’re allowed to know?’

‘Yes, yes, my dear, you’re allowed to know. The dangerous part is over. The deal? Well, we sold oil drilling concessions and rights to the Swiss banking Society collectively - they all have a say and share in it. It was conditional on it being sorted today, conditional on our bank getting a percentage - a generously low percentage - plus the Swiss Government has a say and veto on their use. We received a capital sum, which was about a quarter of what we should have made. That may seem low, but oil exploration is a tricky thing, so maybe not so low.’

‘Did you make as much as on the stock markets the other day?’ Susan asked.

Otto laughed, earning a scowl from her. ‘I am not laughing at you,’ he insisted through a massive grin.

‘So ... you made a lot, lot more?’ she nudged. His look suggested that they had made a *‘lot, lot’* more.

‘There was one other ... small condition,’ Beesely informed Dame Helen through tired eyes. ‘A little skirt lifting.’

‘Ah!’ she acknowledged. ‘Should be interesting.’ She then pointed at her leg. Beesely eased up and looked over the table, noticing now a lightweight plastic cast and ankle support. Turning her wheelchair around she stood with a little difficulty, took five reasonable steps and turned, holding up her hands in question. They applauded as she walked back and sat on a chair.

‘Right,’ Beesely said as he stood. ‘Some phone calls before I fall asleep. Otto, Johnno.’ They stood, moving slowly. ‘We will be back shortly.’

As they left, Susan rolled up her sleeves and started moving cups. 'Can't stand mess.'

* * *

The three Germans had screamed at length; at Pepi, at his lieutenants and then at each other. Now they had gone, stormed out leaving Pepi in the basement pondering many things.

He slumped down onto a sofa, ordering out his assistants. Loosening his tie he recognised the sound of heels on the steps. Maria sat silently. After a full minute Pepi said, 'Gunter stole their oil concessions. We always blamed the bookkeeper - we always thought they were with the files. Now we know.'

Maria said nothing.

Pepi continued, 'K2 sold them to the bank society, making K2 worth at least four times what it was, and that is just in the short-term.'

'My God,' Maria whispered. 'No wonder they were angry.'

'You know what is ironic here? If these American idiots had not attacked K2 they would probably have never noticed the value of these items - they would have stayed in the vaults.'

'K2 have grown very strong,' she risked. 'Perhaps ... perhaps we should work around them?'

Pepi smiled at her, a tired, reluctant smile. Whispering he said, 'I have had the same thought once or twice lately.'

* * *

Beesely slumped into his seat and yawned. Johno opened the fridge and grabbed two beer bottles, handing one to Otto.

Beesely pressed CALL. 'David at The Lodge, America, please.'

'Yes, sir.'

They waited.

'Beesely?'

'Yes, David, how goes it?'

'I'm waiting for the penny to drop, you don't just call to ask how I am.'

'Hope I've not gone that far yet. Listen, just to let you know, this bank used to have some oil concessions - Alaska, Canada, Norway and Greenland.'

'Greenland? No oil in Greenland, except a small offshore field, and that hasn't been tapped yet!'

'Well, we sold them anyway. They were burning holes in our pockets.'

'Get a good price?'

'Let's just say that our bank is now worth four times more than it was when I woke up this morning.'

'Christ! I don't know exactly what it was worth before, but we have an idea.'

'Anyway, I want you to tell all persons in intelligence circles, CIA, NSA - and anyone who worries about the future of America's oil sources - that we have sold all of our concessions to another Swiss group.'

'Why?'

'Why? Because those oil concessions were the reason they tried to kidnap me yesterday, to get hold of them. Ransom me for them. We caught the people responsible, had a chat.'

'And *they* came after you ... for oil concessions?'

'Bits of paper at the moment, but what would a tenth of the Arctic oil be worth in thirty years' time?'

'A lot. And you just reminded me of something, a study I read a few years back - taking Arctic oil by force -

or other means. Funny thing is, someone mentioned it the other day.'

'Layers of an onion, David. Olly was not killed for Project Darwin, or Russian money. Olly was killed because Darwin is step one and those concessions we sold are part of step five or six. It's all linked and, to quote one of your countrymen - *it's all about oil and global warming.*'

'Global warming?'

'When the ice melts, drilling gets real easy up north, old buddy.'

'Something else that was mentioned recently as well, after the Russians claimed their part of the Arctic Sea.'

'Are you sitting down, David?'

'Yes.'

'Alone?'

A shot rang out, muffled and distorted by the phone. Johnno and Otto jumped up, moving closer to the phone.

Beesely pressed END. 'OK,' he said, seemingly not too concerned. 'Plan 'B' ... I reckon.'

Plan 'B'

1

'My God!' Otto said in a voice that was just about as loud as his personality would allow, sedate by British standards. 'They are killing The Lodge.'

'Can we expect company?' Johno asked, concerned.

'I doubt it,' Beesely calmly suggested. He drummed his fingers, looking down and thinking. 'I need to sleep, I'm done in. Otto, I want those ... Internet people who -' he waved his hand.

'Web designers? Hackers?' Otto prompted.

'Yes. Both. Best there is, several of them. Oh, get onto some American theatrical agencies, find some look-alikes of me.'

'Decoys!' Johno approved with a grin.

'Johno, perimeter. We've had a lot of visitors, let's double check everything.' He manipulated the chair's handle and eased back. 'While I think of it, make that CIA guy talk, then kidnap his boss in Berlin, bring him here. And I want some good news on that damn South African. Now scoot.'

* * *

Johno called the 'action squads' to assembly, the senior guards commanders in attendance. 'OK, gentlemen –'

'Something must be up,' Kev suggested. 'Calling us *gentlemen*!' A few laughs echo around the great hall. The metal knights fixed to the walls looked on with curious inactivity.

'Right,' Johno began again. 'We've had a lot of visitors and a lot of vehicles in here.' He addressed the

senior guards. 'I want this castle searched top to bottom, especially the restaurant, toilets and other communal areas - finger tip search and sweep for bugs, same then for the grounds.' He sent them off. 'Reaction squads, we've had some developments, you might get the chance to earn some injury compensation. You lot are on silent alarm.'

Weapons were cocked and checked, echoing around the high-ceilinged room.

* * *

The assassin stared down at the man he knew well, but with no regret. David lay slumped over his study desk, dark blood covering his papers and files, dripping off the desk edge and pooling on the floor.

The light on the phone flashed for a moment then went out. The caller had hung up.

Mr. Grey turned and walked out. Easing into the passenger seat of a Lexus he fixed his seatbelt.

'Alles in ordnung?' Herr Mole enquired.

'Alles gute,' Mr. Grey responded as they drove off.

* * *

Martin Preston, Deputy Section Chief of the CIA, Berlin, had thrown-up all over the concrete floor of the chair room. And over himself. Being strapped to a chair had not helped with desired trajectories. The guards scooping it up and putting on his head had not helped either. Mr. Preston did not seem to be enjoying the chosen video.

A guard burst in. 'The boss called, we must make him talk - only one hour.'

'One hour?' the guards protested. 'Shit. OK, strip him. Get the knives and the blow torch.'

Preston's eyes widened.

The CIA's Berlin Chief, William Heralda, cared little for the fact that his vomit now fell across rural German villages. He did not, at this particular moment, consider people looking up, out walking their dogs or sunbathing on this pleasant day. He was preoccupied with wondering why he was hanging upside-down out of the side of a helicopter as it sped low over the pleasant German countryside, his current situation seemingly down to the German security services.

An hour later he sat the right way up, now in front of Beesely and Otto. He was in his late forties, bald, with a round and dimpled face.

'You don't look too well, old chap,' Beesely politely enquired as he poured out tea for their guest. 'Have some tea and you will feel much better.'

A guard appeared with a towel and a bottle of water, handing them to Heralda, who welcomingly rubbed his face and neck. He quickly swigged the taste of vomit from his mouth, glancing up at a guard with an MP5. He sat breathing hard, looking from one face to the other, his cheeks reddened, and with a clear hint of fear evident. Beesely gave him five minutes to recover by stepping out to the toilet.

'You know who we are?' Beesely prompted as he sat back down.

'I had a briefing on you ... a few weeks ago. You must be Sir Morris Beesely, and this is K2.'

Beesely had been listening to that sentence with some curiosity; he could detect four different emotions in there. 'I'm afraid you will need to look for a new deputy, we tortured and killed your last one.'

Heralda stopped wiping and froze for a moment. He lowered his gaze and finished off, taking another sip of water. 'He was under investigation. Internally.' He made firm eye contact. 'But you shouldn't have done that.'

To Beesely, the last part of that response revealed anger and professional pride, not any fondness for his former deputy.

'Thing is, old chap, he came down to a hotel owned by my bank with four hired assassins, and tried to either kidnap or kill me and my associates.' Herald's brow had slowly furrowed. 'Call me old fashioned, but people trying to kill me has always made me a tad upset. Personality flaw, granted, and I shall have to work on it. But, for the moment, I still get angry when people try and kill me.' He shrugged apologetically.

'You have the evidence?' Herald quietly enquired.

'Caught red handed, given up by his own people.' Beesely sat back and waited. 'Would you like me to send the evidence to the President, or your director, George Holmes? Of course, this chap being your deputy may make things a tad awkward for you.'

Herald seemed concerned, before lightening and slowly breathing out, resigned to some private thought.

'What, pray tell,' Beesely enquired, 'was the subject of the internal enquiry?'

Herald sipped his tea, a welcome relief after the last hour. 'Routine checks showed up unusual contact Stateside. People he was talking to were NSA, some DOD. Nothing wrong with that in particular, but unusual still, especially without mentioning it to me and the section.'

‘Any clues as to what he was into, other than trying to kill little old me?’

Heralda sipped his tea again, taking a moment to compose himself. ‘Why did you put out that horseshit after the big attack on you, praising the CIA and the President?’

‘Good question,’ Beesely said with a large smile. ‘Well, why did I do it? Because I believe in western democracy, rule of law, NATO, economic stability...’ He stopped smiling, just as his prisoner seemed to perk up. ‘And because I don’t like secret little splinter groups trying to manipulate the US Government and military into making huge mistakes.’ He leant forwards. ‘Mistakes like ... selling bio-weapons to Boris Luchenkov.’

Heralda was shocked.

‘Yes, my friend. Some of your lot were directly implicated with that, taking half a billion in payment from the Russian who, by all accounts, wants a new right-wing... *white* Russian super-power.’

Heralda stared back, stunned and confused.

Beesely continued, ‘What do you think would have happened if the terrorists had spread radioactive ball bearings around London? Economic collapse, the end of NATO, martial Law?’ The last two words seemed to register with Herald. Beesely raised his eyebrows in a question for his guest. ‘Something?’ he probed.

‘Something alright,’ Herald quietly let out, looking down for a moment. ‘A scenario study that came across my desk last week. Usual doomsday stuff.’

‘And?’ Beesely sarcastically probed. ‘Is this scenario starting to be acted out, perhaps?’ Herald glanced from one face to the next. ‘Look,’ Beesely began, sounding almost sympathetic. ‘You can help us prevent this nonsense, or ... I can send the President enough info’ to put you in jail. Or I can just kill you.’

Heralda straightened. 'You don't need to threaten me, I agree with your sentiments, asshole.'

'There we go,' Beesely enthused. 'And all it took was being dangled out of a helicopter by his ankles.'

Johnno tipped his head forwards. 'It's a technique I've often advocated, both for business and private use.' Beesely sarcastically nodded his agreement with that.

Otto added, 'You English are way behind us Swiss. We have been using that for almost sixty years. You could learn a lot from a civilised country like *this*.'

Heralda glanced from face to face then took a breath. 'I can get the details of who Preston was in contact with. So long as there is no come-back to me.'

'Trust me,' Beesely began. 'They will be far too busy with other matters to worry about you.'

The desk phone burst into life. 'Sir! The boy, Thomas, he has shot and killed a kitchen worker!'

Johnno was up in an instant, Otto beating him through the door, Beesely walking quickly out a second later. Neither Otto nor Johnno bothered with the lift, they sprinted up the stairs, Otto making good progress without the incumbent problems of Johnno's knee injuries and bounding up three steps at a time. Johnno's determination kept him in the race, reaching the kitchen just two seconds after Otto.

A 9mm Walther PPK rested on a table, spent cases littering the floor. The four girls were crying, huddled in a corner with Patrick. Susan sat next to a defiant Thomas, a guard stood the other side. The kitchen worker lay slumped against the counter, four shots visible in her white coveralls.

Otto stopped dead in the middle of it all, panting. He glanced down at the dead woman, then at Thomas. The rest of the kitchen staff stood huddled together, peering over the counter. He knelt in front of Thomas as Johnno

checked the body; no signs of life, two good hits to the heart as he had taught the boy, but also two shots low.

‘Thomas!’ Otto called in a strained whisper. ‘Why?’

‘She was a spy!’ Thomas screamed.

‘He’s been saying that over and over,’ Susan calmly informed Otto. ‘That this woman was a spy.’

Otto glanced at the body, vaguely recognising the face from recent use of the kitchen, but not connecting strongly to her or remembering the woman’s name. He sharply called Herr Frieserling when the castle manager stepped in, asking a flurry of questions about the woman.

Frieserling insisted that the woman was known and that the security checks were satisfactory, rapidly and sometimes angrily exchanging with Otto as Johnno checked the body.

Otto turned to Thomas and quietly asked, ‘Why do you think she was a spy?’

‘She said she knew my mother,’ Thomas explained, now tearful.

Armed guards piled into the doorway, Johnno very firmly telling them to wait outside.

‘Why did you shoot her?’ Otto asked, trying to calm Thomas.

‘She ... she said she was a friend of my mother, but ... but she did not know that I lived here. She ... she said the name of our village wrong. She said she was in school with ... with my mother, but the school name was not correct.’

Johnno had been listening. ‘Standard CIA tactic, to adopt the identity of someone dead, or to pretend to have been their friend.’

Otto glanced over his shoulder at Johnno before turning back to the boy. ‘Are you sure?’

Johnno pulled out a miniature bottle of what appeared to be eardrops from the ladies trouser pocket. He read the

German label. Eardrops. Up against the light he held it, looking through the glass; there were remnants of a previous label. He could not make out the words, but he could see the small skull and cross-bones symbol: poison. 'Poison,' he stated as he stood.

Otto jumped up, glancing at it. He grabbed it and gave it a guard. 'Analysis! Immediately!' The man bolted out. Otto sought out Herr Frieserling, angered, but forcing himself to calm down. 'Background check - her house, belongings, friends and associates.' The castle manager walked briskly out.

Johno stood in front of Otto, a hand on his shoulder, both their heads tipped forwards and close. A moment passed before Johno tipped his head towards Thomas.

Otto took a deep breath and turned. 'Thomas, it looks as if she was a spy. You ... may be correct. And, if she had poison, you have saved us all.' Thomas brightened a little. 'But you should have told us, not done anything yourself! Understand?'

Thomas lowered his head and nodded.

Johno stepped up to Susan and Patrick, heaving a big sigh. 'I cannot apologise enough for this,' he said, his hands upturned. Susan took a deep breath and glanced at the body, rubbing her forehead as Beesely walked in. Johno turned to the girls. 'Girls,' he called. 'This woman was a spy, sent here to harm Dame Helen and Uncle Beesely. What happened is terrible, but she came here to harm us. What we do here is important, and Tabitha's mother is a very important person, which is why we have such tight security.'

Beesely glanced at the body, then at Thomas. He met Otto's stunned gaze then stood next to Johno, facing the girls. 'Are you OK, girls?' Still tearful, they nodded. He turned to Susan, waving over Patrick. 'Dungeon, please.'

All of them. Now.’ The girls were led quickly out. Beesely stood over the body. ‘Was she a spy?’

Johnno stuck his hands in his pockets. ‘Seems like a vial of poison, they’re analysing it now. She made a mistake with her cover story.’ Beesely turned his head, frowning a question. Johnno explained, ‘She assumed an identity, using a former friendship of Thomas’ mum. Overlooked the fact that the little runt is still here. He spotted the inconsistencies straight away, she got some details wrong.’

Beesely breathed heavily. ‘We were lucky. Otto, Johnno, we have unfinished business.’

3

They settled back into Beesely’s office, looking harassed, their prisoner being closely watched by four guards. Beesely waved the guards out.

‘What happened?’ Heralda delicately enquired, studying each face.

Beesely ran a hand over his scalp. ‘A young lad in our charge, adopted, spotted a spy in our midst, a CIA plant, and shot the woman. No particular problem with that, other than the fact that he did it in front of a room full of visitors.’

‘Did you say ... CIA plant?’

‘Seems that way,’ Johnno affirmed. ‘Adopted an identity that involved a dead friend, but got some details wrong.’

‘Send my office her fingerprints. Do it now, I’ll call them,’ Heralda hurriedly offered.

Beesely glanced at Otto. Otto shrugged slightly, lifting his phone and standing to one side.

‘It will be done,’ Beesely informed him with strong eye contact, making it sound a threat. He pressed CALL. ‘Get me the assistant to the Section Chief, CIA, Berlin.’

‘Samantha Robbins,’ Heralda helpfully, and hurriedly, supplied.

‘Did you get that?’

‘Yes, sir.’

They waited.

‘Chief’s office?’ came a woman’s voice a few seconds later.

Beesely turned the phone towards the prisoner.

‘It’s me, Sam,’ Heralda shouted.

‘That was a long lunch break. You coming back?’

‘Listen, some fingerprints coming your way in the next few minutes, rush job, all agencies, be difficult. Call me on my cell. Got to go.’

Beesely stabbed END with a finger, beckoning a guard. ‘New shirt and jacket for our guest, and some trousers. Bring a sample.’ The tall guard grabbed Heralda under the armpits and lifted him upright in one swift movement. Stood alongside, the guard sized up Heralda, noting where Heralda’s shoulders hit his own chest, before stepping out.

‘We grow ‘em big around yer,’ Johno joked.

‘So,’ Heralda ventured as he sat. ‘Is roasting my chestnuts off the agenda?’

‘For the moment,’ Beesely informed him with a warning glare. He eased back, regarding their guest ‘What do you *like*, William?’

‘Like?’

Beesely waved a hand. ‘Vices, hobbies?’

Heralda raised an eyebrow. ‘Vices?’

Beesely’s features hardened. ‘We could find out, *very* quickly.’

Heralda gave it some thought, glancing from face to face. ‘Suppose you lot could. OK, I like young East European hookers.’

‘Any particular preference?’ Beesely nudged.

‘Small and skinny.’

‘We like to reward our friends, William. If it turns out you are not an enemy, and you help, you get your choice of the world’s best young ladies, plus a bank account for retirement purposes.’ Heralda’s eyes widened. ‘Now, that’s not a bribe, and we are not asking you to betray anyone, we are simply offering to reward you ... for doing your job.’ Beesely jabbed a finger towards him. ‘And by that, I simply mean that you don’t behave like –’

‘Preston,’ Johno put it.

‘Yes, like that idiot, Preston. If you are not corrupt, if you follow the chain of command, then we will get on fine.’

‘I see no problem with that.’ Heralda sipped his tea, grimacing at the cool liquid. ‘But what if orders come down from on high, to watch you?’

‘I’d expect you to tip us off, take the money, then do what your bosses are asking you to do. Best of both worlds, everyone is happy.’

Heralda shook his head. ‘You have a very strange way of looking at the world, Mister Beesely.’

‘Try working here,’ Johno quipped.

‘Sir?’ came from the phone.

‘Yes.’

‘We have the boyfriend of the kitchen worker. He is German, not Swiss as she claimed.’

‘To the hill camp. Interrogate, but please make every effort to establish identity before we harm him.’ He pressed END.

Heralda tipped his head forwards. ‘Again, fingerprints.’

Beesely turned his head. 'Otto, fingerprints on the boyfriend as well.' Otto nodded, returning to his call. Finally he rejoined them. 'How about,' Beesely sarcastically began, facing Otto, 'we increase the budget on background checks four-fold, go back through everyone?'

Otto was still clearly affected, but reluctantly nodded his acceptance of the idea, taking a lukewarm coffee off the desk.

'OK, William, where were we? Ah, yes, you were going to let us know who, in particular, your deputy was chit-chatting to.'

He took out his mobile phone, hesitated, then selected a number. Then he closed the flip phone. 'Not going to work down here, is it!'

'Actually, we have our own boosters,' Beesely pointed out. 'They work fine.'

Heralda selected the number, checking the signal strength as he did: four out of five bars were indicated. 'It's me. Sat behind a terminal?' He waited, looking down at the carpet. 'You logged in? Look in my directory ... staff ... Preston ... internal ... contacts. Is it open?'

He looked up and pointed at the paper and pen on Beesely's desk. Johnno eased up and moved it across, handing over a pen. Heralda started to write, five names and numbers. 'Thanks, close it down.' He hung up. Pushing the pad across to Beesely he said, 'Those are the people he has –' he tipped his head. '- *had* been in contact with.'

Beesely tore off the page and handed it to Otto, who ran an eye over the names.

'One is familiar,' Otto mentioned as he stood. He stepped out, studying the list.

'What are you planning on doing?' Heralda enquired. 'Those are our people.'

‘Those *people*, young man, may be involved with selling dangerous weapons to wealthy Russians. How would *your* superiors deal with them?’

Heralda sat back and gave it more thought. ‘I think you know what would happen to them. Car accident here, drink drive conviction there, heart attack or two - all very sad, *they will be missed*.’

‘Any particular reason why we should not follow your example?’ Beesely pointedly asked.

‘Because first *we* would find out *who* was above them, following it back to a decision maker,’ Heraldal pointed out.

‘Which is what I was planning,’ Beesely said with a wink. ‘To quote the great Sergeant Johnno Williams, VC, Congressional Medal of Honour - *we should not shoot the foot soldiers!*’

Otto returned and sat, to Beesely’s left.

Heralda’s brow knitted. ‘That’s the guy who crashed a helicopter into the terrorist car in London, and flew it out to sea.’

‘That’s the guy sat on my right.’ Heraldal turned to Otto. ‘No, my *other* right!’

He turned to Johnno, who waved, a childlike bending of his fingers. ‘Good to know you,’ Heraldal offered.

‘Good to know that we don’t have to roast your chestnuts,’ Johnno retorted.

Heralda’s expression suggested he strongly agreed with that sentiment. His mobile phone started to ring, the signature theme from the Lone Ranger. Beesely and Johnno made eye contact.

‘Yeah?’ Heraldal listened. ‘OK, great.’ He closed his flip-phone and looked up. ‘That woman was a freelance asset of our Paris branch. They have a new section head, only been there two weeks ... and lots of gossip about all sorts of strange things.’

‘Like American mercenaries?’ Beesely probed.

‘I need to be in my office to help further.’ He stood. ‘And I want ten million in a safe and discreet Swiss bank account.’ He smiled. ‘No pun intended.’

Beesely stood. ‘A million per year of good service,’ he coldly stated. ‘First year up-front, thereafter in arrears.’

‘No problem, but I’ll only be here another two years, then someplace else.’

‘And probably someplace just as useful,’ Beesely hinted, his chin out.

Heralda shrugged. ‘Step by step then. And don’t forget the girls. As soon as I read the report on you I knew there would be ... *opportunities*.’

‘I believe we have a strong presence in Berlin,’ Beesely assured him. ‘How would you like to go back? Train ... perhaps?’

‘No, helicopter is just fine, so long as I’m *inside it*.’

Beesely gestured to the door, Otto instructing the guards, who led Heraldia out. He sampled the temperature of a few cups then eased back into his seat.

‘Trust him?’ Johno asked, standing and also testing the temperature of various teas and coffees.

‘Yes, I think so,’ Beesely began, making a face. ‘The bad boys will only trust a few branches of the spider’s web, not everyone. He seems well suited - girls and money. I always trust people with vices.’

Otto asked. ‘The Paris chief?’

‘What? Oh, try and grab him quickly. He is our best hope for the name of a senior person. The decision maker.’

4

Otto lifted his phone as Dame Helen wheeled herself in.

Beesely went quickly around to her. ‘Helen, I can’t apologise enough for what happened –’

‘Was that woman a plant?’ she coldly asked.

Beesely sighed. ‘Yes, CIA.’ She stared down at nothing in particular. ‘Is Tabitha OK?’

‘No!’ she said, angry, but not at Beesely. ‘She and Mike were doing much better, especially after talking with Blaum after —’ she waved. ‘- face fungus got them together.’ Johnno ran a forefinger and thumb down his moustache.

‘Blaum?’ Beesely puzzled.

‘Later. What’s been happening? I hate being kept in the dark!’

Beesely sat back down. ‘You must be feeling better,’ he quietly noted. Then louder, ‘Well, we uncovered the Deputy Chief CIA Berlin, now the Section Chief Paris is in it up to his armpits, and we have a list of five more Stateside.’

‘Christ, Beesely, if you do anything to *them* the Americans will jump all over you!’

‘Guess we shouldn’t have given that Yank *the chair* earlier,’ Johnno mentioned in passing.

‘What?’ she shrieked.

‘And his boss we dangled out of a helicopter,’ Johnno added, enjoying it.

She wheeled herself closer. ‘Christ Beesely, are you trying to start a war?’

‘Don’t worry, my dear, I have a plan.’ He shrugged. ‘What are the Americans going to do? Risk exposure of what they were really up to? No, they will go to great lengths to cover it up.’

A manager knocked and entered, Beesely waving him in. ‘Sir, we have the look-a-like actors.’

Dame Helen glanced at the manager before turning back to Beesely. ‘Actors? Decoys?’

‘We’ve got Dame Judi Dench to play you!’ Johnno joked.

‘What?’ she asked, confused.

Beesely delicately offered her a flat hand. Addressing the manager he said, ‘I want them dressed like me, given large expense accounts, and hire genuine American security for them, at least four men for each one. They are to book themselves into various hotels as me, Sir Morris Beesely from Switzerland. They pay for everything in cash, lots of cash. They ... er ... go to casinos a lot.

‘Right, now before they book into a hotel I need the name of the intended hotel a day early. Then I want Mossad and MI6 assets, plus some of ours, into the hotel the day before, set up with hidden cameras.’

‘Cameras?’ Dame Helen queried.

Beesely explained, ‘The aim is to photograph and fingerprint anyone who takes an interest in these people. That’s all, no offensive action *at all*, defence if necessary.’ He turned squarely to Dame Helen. ‘We will need your assets, not in Arizona and Mississippi for now I’m afraid—’

‘Yes,’ Johno insisted. ‘In Arizona and Mississippi – it’ll look like we’re getting close to what they’re up to, spook them. May even catch a big fish.’

‘OK, seems to make sense.’ He turned back to the manager. ‘Got all that?’

‘Yes, sir. Photograph those watching, sir.’

‘And digital photos, back here as soon as possible, email thingy.’ The man nodded and stepped out.

‘What are you up to now?’ Dame Helen asked, concerned.

‘I’m taking a leaf out of Johno’s book.’

Johno looked worried. ‘Internet porn?’

Beesely let his shoulders drop. ‘No,’ he said out of the side of his mouth. To Dame Helen he said, ‘*We don’t shoot the foot soldiers.*’

‘So you photograph them? So what?’ she questioned.

‘Sir,’ a manager announced, stood in the doorway. ‘Web designers.’

Dame Helen started shaking her head. ‘How to win friends and influence people,’ she muttered.

‘I had that book sent to me, anonymously, several times,’ Johno mentioned to no one in particular.

The web designers stepped in, four of them, all casually dressed, each appearing to be in their mid twenties. They pulled up chairs as old cups were removed and fresh tea brought in.

Beesely turned to Otto and whispered, ‘All security cleared?’ Otto nodded. Beesely faced the group. ‘OK, gentlemen, we have a project for you. Unfortunately, we need it done by tomorrow.’

They did not seem fazed by it. ‘What do you need?’ one asked in an English accent.

‘What I need is this. I need a website with photographs of CIA agents ... that the CIA cannot stop us displaying.’

At first they were shocked, but then smiled at each other. ‘Cool.’

‘Good. Oh, and please correct me as I go, about web stuff and lingo. When I went to school it was chalk and slates.’

They laughed. ‘A website the CIA cannot *pull down*,’ one helpfully corrected, a European accent. Beesely made a note. ‘And you want a photo gallery site with expanding thumbnails.’

‘Excellent. Right, we need such a site, nothing special, up and running tomorrow –’

‘I have one we can use,’ one said.

‘Good. We need to then advertise it in the States so those people who don’t like the US Government might find it.’

They burst out laughing.

‘What’s so funny?’ Beesely asked, glaring.

‘There are thousands of websites which criticise the White House, especially *black ops*.’

Beesely brightened. ‘Really? How does that help?’

‘We link into them, swap banners.’

‘Banners?’ Beesely repeated.

‘Small adverts on a site, click on it and you go to another site,’ Johno idly explained.

Beesely turned to him. ‘Don’t tell me *you’re* up to speed on all this stuff?’

‘How do you think I got Alison Star to visit us?’

‘Alison Star?’ the web designers asked, their excited questions overlapping.

Beesely offered them looks of mock outrage. ‘How do you know who she is?’ They stopped smiling. ‘Just kidding,’ Beesely joked. ‘Lovely girl. Few days ago you could have seen her riding a red tractor naked through the grounds.’

Dame Helen cleared her throat.

‘OK, back to business,’ Beesely encouraged. ‘Right, we need a site, or sites, that have these CIA photos on, advertised to the American public. But won’t the CIA be able to –’ he checked his notes. ‘- *pull them down*, right away.’

‘Not if they’re hosted over here. And we’ll redirect and move it around. Dead stop it.’

‘Now I’m lost,’ Johno admitted.

‘We’ll leave the mechanics to you young guys. Just have some fun and make yourselves a lot of money.’

‘Where are the photos?’ one asked.

‘They will be sent to us soon, we already have a handful.’

‘Twelve,’ Otto clarified. ‘Plus names and cover names, fingerprints.’

‘We can display the fingerprints as photos, same deal,’ a young man indicated.

‘Fine, get to it, gentlemen.’

They stood, one stopping. ‘Sir, if you have any jobs going here, let me know. This place is *so strange*.’

5

‘Tell you the one person we haven’t spoken to,’ Johnno began as he stood. They turned. ‘Burke, in London.’

Beesely faced Otto. ‘Has he been using that account?’

‘Only in a small way. I have carefully tracked everything, no links.’ Beesely mulled it over.

‘Perhaps we should bring him in?’ Johnno suggested, sipping one of the web designer’s untouched teas.

‘To tell you the truth,’ Beesely quietly admitted. ‘I always figured he was a bit too stupid, either way.’

Dame Helen smiled. ‘Me too.’

Beesely added, ‘If he had pocketed the money, or used it for something cheeky then I’d have more respect for the chap.’

A manager appeared with a report. He knocked, but did not wait to enter. ‘Sir, the South African men talked, we have a link back to Paris. Same for the man Preston before he ... left us.’

‘So,’ Dame Helen realised, ‘CIA Chief Paris was the hub.’

‘And probably expecting a visit,’ Johnno insisted. ‘I would be.’

Beesely put a hand on Otto’s shoulder. ‘Halt the kidnap team for the moment, it could be a trap.’ Otto stepped out. Beesely pressed CALL. ‘Ellen Rosen, Mossad, London.’

They waited.

‘Beesely, how are things?’

‘Listen up. Berlin CIA chief is OK, Paris chief dirty.’

‘Interesting, Beesely. Had a word to that effect yesterday. He has met up with a number of Paris mafia leaders, throwing some money around.’

‘Money for what?’

‘Don’t know, can’t pry too much. Is he connected to your recent problems?’

‘He *is* the recent problem.’

‘That’s not so good. His position in Paris was a surprise, he should be three ranks higher.’

‘Took a step down?’ Beesely asked. ‘Punishment?’

‘Not punishment, I hear.’

‘Then he’s there to oversee a large project,’ Beesely suggested. ‘Do you know the names of the Mafia men?’

‘They are known as the East Bank gang. Nasty group, mostly drugs. They execute their competitors in a fashion that would make you proud.’

‘Elle, anything you have on this guy I want, and straight away. Question, are your resources for lifting him in Paris better than ours?’

‘I would not think so. We could put a team and a plan together in one or two weeks, but I seriously doubt it would be approved.’

‘Send me what you have, warn your people.’

‘What are you going to do?’ came a concerned voice.

‘Best you don’t know.’ He pressed END. ‘Johno, all managers.’ Johno stepped out as Otto re-entered. ‘Otto, anyone even remotely linked to a Paris gang steps over our border ... shoot their bloody kneecaps out.’ Otto lifted his phone.

Beesely made eye contact with Helen. ‘Are you holding up?’

‘Don’t worry about me,’ she firmly insisted. ‘Start nailing some of these troublemakers. By the time I get back I want a clear desk.’

Beesely cocked an eyebrow at her. Managers rushed in and seated themselves, followed by Johnno.

‘OK, are we all here?’ Beesely called. He drummed his fingers for a moment. ‘Otto, we don’t have a strong working relationship with DGSE in Paris, do we?’

‘Who does?’ Johnno quipped.

‘No,’ Otto answered, a slight grin at Johnno’s remark.

‘Do we have any contacts inside the East Side gang?’

‘East *Bank* gang,’ Johnno corrected. Then whispering, ‘The other’s a musical.’

‘Yes,’ a manager nodded as Beesely glared at Johnno. ‘I have good sleeper agents and contacts.’

‘Excellent. Right, tell them to contact the boss of the... gang –’ he glanced at Johnno. ‘- and to call me as soon as possible.’ The man stepped out. ‘OK, we can now be reasonably sure that –’

‘Intruder! Shots fired!’ burst from the phone.

The managers remained seated. Johnno eased up and drew his MP5, cocking and checking before stepping into the corridor. He made a few hand signals and returned, sitting on the cabinet directly behind Beesely.

‘Report,’ Beesely calmly ordered, button held down.

‘Sir, single man, far west end of compound, camouflaged. He is wounded, but alive.’

‘It’s getting dark,’ Johnno informed the group, checking his watch.

‘Silent alarm,’ Beesely ordered.

Johnno stepped closer. ‘No, try this. Minimal lighting, draw back the guards inside, use the sensors and cameras, let them get close and grab them. We have tranquillisers now, and this attack won’t be big, it’ll be stealthy - ones and twos.’

Beesely’s wave around the managers approved the idea, the managers quickly issuing orders into their phones.

‘Standby helicopters,’ Johno added, ‘and drop a police cordon five miles out and start working inwards with our boys.’

Beesely nodded his approval. ‘Good. Right, let’s continue. This Paris gang, who may already be knocking on our door it seems, are linked to the Paris CIA chief, who seems to be behind a large part of our problems. Oh, let’s see if we can get his bank details and credit cards.’

‘They won’t fall for that,’ Johno scoffed. ‘His bosses will ignore it.’

‘Perhaps. Depends on what happens next.’ He raised a finger. ‘I have a plan. Right ... er ... Paris gang, I want their boss to call. We have the South African, that tracks right back to Paris, so did the idiot from the Spa, so did the ex-SAS mercenaries who came up from Africa.’

‘So did nine of the mercs’ who hit us the other week,’ Johno pointed out. ‘All South Africans.’

Otto leant forwards. ‘And we have determined that the assembly points for the mercenaries were mostly on French soil.’

Beesely drummed his fingers on the desk as he thought. ‘And yet ... no word from the French. A bit slack.’ He raised his head. ‘OK, what else?’ he asked himself. ‘Right, websites are being created, and we will post on them the faces and details of CIA agents involved in this. After that, they won’t be able to work and so will be let go by the agency, in most cases at least. They will also attract the attention of the FBI and others. We also have my doppelgangers about to ruin my reputation in America, no doubt, in their choice of suits!’

‘Some of them will be killed,’ Johno pointed out as Otto turned on the desk computer and quickly called up compound cameras.

‘Can’t be helped,’ Beesely insisted. ‘We need to step up a gear.’

‘Sir?’ came from the phone.

‘Yes?’

‘Call for you, from Paris, a Monsieur Leponte.’

‘Put him through, please.’

‘Allo? Mister Bis-el-lay?’ came a heavily accented voice.

‘Yes, good evening. You are Leponte?’

‘Yes. I can speak the English. You ... Herr Director, K2?’

‘Yes. And what type of business are *you* in?’

‘I think you know this. We are East Bank.’

‘OK, I will keep this very simple. How much money to kidnap the CIA chief in Paris?’

‘Ah ... but he is the business friend.’

‘How much?’

‘A million dollars.’

Beesely was taken aback, glancing at Otto. Otto frowned and shrugged at the low amount.

‘Mister Leponte, I will give you five million dollars on delivery, safe and alive. Understand?’

‘Yes, of course. And it is the good fortune.’

‘Why?’

‘Tonight we want to meet to talk of you.’ Laughing could be heard in the background.

‘Did you help him last week? In his actions against us?’

Leponte hesitated. ‘My people helped him last week, yes.’

‘Do you know how many of the men who attacked us are still alive?’

‘No.’

‘One of them.’

‘One?’

‘Yes. One. Those who were injured were burnt alive.’

‘I have heard this.’

‘Keep that in mind in your business dealings with us. Call me again when you have him, I will send helicopters.’

‘OK.’

‘Mister Leponte, a deal is a deal. If you make any problems for us ... we will come for you.’

‘I understand this.’

‘Call me soon.’ He hung up. ‘I want my five million back. As soon as we have the Paris chief I want the East Bank gang wiped out.’

‘That’ll piss-off the French security services,’ Johnno cautioned.

‘Why, they’re gangsters?’ Beesely puzzled.

‘Which, I hear, kill suspected al-Qa’eda for the DGSE from time to time, tail them and sell info,’ Johnno pointed out.

‘I have heard this also,’ Otto added. ‘But, there is an alternative. They have a small war with a gang in Marseille.’

A manager raised his hand. ‘I have a good contact in this Marseille gang. They are stronger.’

Beesely faced the man. ‘OK, pay your gang to attack the East Bank ... in force. Hell, supply them with weapons and intelligence. But let’s be careful, we don’t want the French authorities on our backs.’

‘A minute ago you were ready to wipe them out,’ Johnno pointed out.

‘I can see sense when it is presented to me by someone of your calibre.’ He held his gaze on Johnno.

Johnno tipped his head and squinted at Beesely, Beesely winking at Dame Helen without Johnno noticing.

‘Sir, intruder on mountain,’ came out of the phone.

‘We should get that Israeli arms dealer back,’ Johnno joked.

‘I am very tempted to introduce our friend on the mountain to an Apache,’ Beesely quietly stated, almost to

himself as he squinted at the screen. Otto had the movement sensor grid up, Dame Helen closing in. Three yellow dots had turned green in a line.

‘They’re probably French,’ Johno suggested. ‘And our new friend, Lepontey, is playing both sides off against the middle, money from both groups.’

‘For another day,’ Beesely threatened without taking his gaze off the screen.

‘Mountain command post to command centre,’ crackled from the desk phone.

‘Yes, go ahead.’

‘We have tranquillised a man on the mountain, sir.’

‘Good. Bring him down quietly.’

‘The attackers haven’t been well briefed,’ Johno insisted. ‘Same shit. It’s almost as if they want us to kill them.’

‘It is a trick,’ Otto confidently suggested. ‘For the newspapers.’

‘Newspapers?’ Dame Helen repeated.

Beesely explained, ‘Our CIA friend probably wants Swiss media against us. That would mean our toys get taken off us. Suppressing the news the last time was tricky and expensive, but the story of the bank robbery answered all their questions well enough. Good thing about the Swiss is that any questions about banks are taboo most of the time.’

‘But gun battles are not,’ Dame Helen muttered. Then louder, ‘Blaum and your bank guy are still here.’

‘Ah, I had almost forgotten.’ He pressed CALL. ‘Minister Blaum, please.’ They waited.

‘Yes, Beesely?’

‘Are you OK to stay here for a while longer, some unwelcome visitors outside?’

‘I have not heard anything?’

‘We are using tranquilliser guns where we can.’

‘Ah, an excellent idea. Is it not safe for me to leave?’

‘Probably is OK, but I would not wish to risk you.’

‘My wife will be struggling –’

‘I may not have mentioned this earlier, Minister, but Johnno brought something to my attention. We have two home-helpers at your house. And a driver.’

‘That is not necessary,’ Blaum quietly suggested.

‘Least we can do, given the fact that you have to ... *clean up after me.*’ He glanced at Dame Helen. ‘So call your dear lady wife and keep your head down until morning, we are sweeping the area outside.’

‘The visiting chef is still here –’

‘Can’t use the restaurant at the moment. Glass roof!’

‘Very well. I will try the dungeon bar.’ He hung up.

A big fish

1

The CIA Paris Section Chief, Emerson, checked the dark street as he clambered out from his car and straightened. The wide, tree lined suburban road seemed quiet enough, dotted with large gates set into high stone walls that had seen better days. He closed the door on his driver and bodyguard and stepped up to the gates of the Leponte residence for the third time, not expecting any trouble, a quick glance over his shoulder at the street.

Unlit, the gates opened into a dark courtyard as on previous occasions, dark shadows of men nestled into the walls. He walked across the cobbles, around a fountain that had seen better days and into the slit of light coming from a crack in a heavy wooden door. Inside offered a stark contrast; well decorated, colourful and modern. Nondescript on the outside, drug dealer's lair on the inside.

'Emerson! Come in, come in,' Leponte called, a glass in his hand. 'I am glad you are here.'

'Really?' Emerson muttered, not interested in engaging his contact in anything other than business. The Paris chief was now forty-five, but with a good physique and still a good head of dark hair.

'Drink, Emerson?'

'No,' Emerson pointedly replied.

'That is unfortunate.'

Emerson stopped and stared down at the shorter man. 'Why? Good year, was it?'

'No. It was drugged.'

Emerson's eyes widened, his anger quickly growing. 'Drugged?'

‘Yes, my friend. Now we have to do this.’

Emerson could feel the sting in his butt cheek, spinning quickly. The man who had injected him had stepped back sharply, smiling broadly at his victim.

Emerson reached for his pistol, Leponte grabbing Emerson’s arm and relieving him of his Berretta, his guest now wobbling backwards.

‘Why?’ Emerson demanded in a strained whisper, his eyes flashing with anger.

‘Five million dollars, my friend. That is why.’ Leponte was now all business, his eyes cold. He made eye contact with his men, the two of them catching Emerson just in time; his captive would not have been as profitable with a broken skull. Emerson groaned and struggled, staring up at his captors. ‘I ... can give you ... more.’

‘Money is no good to me if I am dead, Mister Emerson,’ Leponte pointedly remarked. ‘You sent a hundred men to K2 - good soldiers - and only one survived. I have been doing my research, Mister Emerson. This K2 is very strong, a match even for you.’

In the street, Emerson’s driver and bodyguard closed their eyes and looked away, to preserve their night vision, as a lorry made its way along the road. The lorry trundled slowly towards them, nothing out of the ordinary.

But with their eyes closed they could not have known what was coming next. They heard and felt the impact as their car’s wheels prevented sideways motion against the high curb, and buckled. They were crushed in upon themselves, rolling over and flattening as if a coke can. Their crushed car, unfortunately, made a decent ramp for the lorry’s large wheels and it kept going, crushing them in this ‘terrible accident’. The lorry hit the wall and stopped dead, the police having been called a full two minutes earlier.

Beesely woke at 2am and wandered outside. Many of the same staff seemed to be still on duty, about a quarter in the rest area. The command area was quiet, voices low.

A manager walked to the space below him as Beesely rested his arms on the wooden rail. 'We have Emerson, sir.'

'Emerson?'

'The Paris CIA Chief.'

'Ah, good. Any problems?'

'No, sir. Made the swap outside Paris, he's at the airfield.'

'Bring him here, get the doctors to check him. I want to see him 10am. Any problems outside?'

'We have six men, sir. All captured.'

'Oh, excellent. Any casualties?'

The man hesitated. 'One guard accidentally tranquillised, sir.' He shrugged.

'Is he OK?'

'Sleeping, sir.'

'Obviously. Have we contacted the gang in Marseille?'

'No, sir. We have not fixed an amount.'

'Twenty million, paid five million at a time, week by week based on results. Communicate that to them.'

'Yes, sir.'

Johno walked out of the lower bunker entrance, MP5 slung over a shoulder. He noticed Beesely without breaking stride and gave a quick, lazy wave. They met at the top of the stairs.

'Perimeter review?' Beesely asked as he fell into step, heading towards the main entrance.

'Yeah, all quiet. Couple of stealthy amateurs.'

'French?'

'Some just thugs, some Foreign Legion.'

‘Legion? They have some very good boys,’ Beesely questioned.

‘Then these are their rejects, we took them down easily. But, in fairness to our boys, they’re coming along in leaps.’ They walked the short distance to the great hall, troopers jumping up.

‘Boss?’ one called. They closed in.

‘All quiet?’ Beesely enquired.

‘Down here, yes,’ the trooper grumbled.

Beesely eyes narrowed, focusing on the trooper, concerned by the tone. ‘Something on your mind?’

‘The ex-SAS boys are holding the castle, sir, when they’re the best suited to tranquillise the visitors on the mountain. We should be up there, catching the ground huggers.’

Beesely clasped his hands behind his back. ‘A fair point, but the reason you are here is because the castle and the VIPs are important, and you’re best at keeping them safe.’

‘Besides,’ Johnno added in level tones, ‘you’re doing a good job at teaching the camp guard teams. You can’t be everywhere. How you gunna feel if you’re up there when a large force attacks this place? Be gutted then.’ The trooper accepted this point with a shrug and a nod, earning a friendly tap on the head from Johnno.

Johnno led Beesely up the stairs. Guards stood in pairs at each turn, all politely greeted. The restaurant was cleared of staff, most lights off, Kev and the ‘old dogs’ manning the area; two awake, two sleeping across the cushioned seats.

Beesely shook Kev’s hand and whispered. ‘All OK?’

Whispering, and glancing over his shoulder, Kev replied, ‘Most action we had was a wee rock falling off the cliff. Cracked a window.’

‘Don’t tell the builders!’ Beesely whispered with a grin. He patted Kev on the shoulder and took the lift to the dungeon.

As the lift door opened they were surprised to find a small and sedate party in progress. Minister Blaum, Mike and Dame Helen were grouped around Johno’s bar, the lights low.

‘We’re not intruding, are we?’ Beesely whispered.

‘It’s your castle,’ Blaum pointed out. He pulled up a chair for Beesely, pouring wine into a glass.

‘Anything new?’ Dame Helen asked.

‘Six sleepy visitors,’ Beesely informed them. ‘French.’

Johno grabbed a bottle of beer, noticing - and then waving to - a guard sat in the shadows. The man waved back as Johno leant against the bar. Thomas appeared from Johno’s snug and walked across, wearing a tracksuit and rubbing his eyes. He stood in front of Johno, facing the group, his sponsor resting an arm on him.

Beesely added, ‘And we grabbed the Paris Chief. That should be a turning point.’

‘He’s the key?’ Blaum asked.

‘He’s a player. And, I think he knows the decision makers and the whole strategy. So fingers crossed. Cheers.’ He sipped the wine.

‘That’s fifty quid wine,’ Mike pointed out. ‘And it’s in *his* bar.’ He thumbed at Johno.

Beesely offered them a look of mock outrage. ‘What are you saying? That Johno doesn’t know good wine?’

They all faced Johno and laughed. Johno saluted them with his bottle and sipped.

‘I believe that Mr. Freezer selects the booze,’ Beesely pointed out.

‘Freezer?’ Dame Helen queried. ‘Do you mean Herr Frieserling?’

‘Sorry, it’s just that Jane used to call him that,’ he explained, suddenly becoming reflective. ‘Said that he was a bit of a robot, which to this lot is quite the compliment.’

‘She was your daughter,’ Blaum quietly stated.

Beesely forced a quick, polite smile. ‘Yes. Forty-one years old, you know.’ He held Helen’s hand. ‘Not a bad age to get to.’

‘You did not marry?’ Blaum asked.

Beesely shook his head. ‘What I was involved with would shock Helen here. I worked well outside the law, well outside what British Intelligence knew. A family would have been selfish, they would have been in danger.’

‘What about face fungus?’ Helen asked.

Beesely glanced up at Johno. ‘Indiscreet sixties.’

‘He is your son?’ Blaum asked, clearly surprised.

Mike was caught off guard as well. He faced Johno. ‘You’ll inherit the bank?’

‘Not bleeding likely,’ Johno sighed. ‘I’m no administrator, I’ll go sit on a beach.’

‘Huh!’ Beesely quietly let out. ‘You would not sit still on a beach for a week.’

‘You could always get Helen back when you pop off,’ Johno suggested.

Now she said, ‘Huh!’

‘Not such a bad idea,’ Beesely commented.

‘Surely ... Otto ... will run it,’ Blaum suggested after a moments thought, a glance at his shoes. Beesely half turned his head and nodded. Blaum studied Johno for a moment. ‘You ... will work for Otto?’

‘Yeah, no problem. Life is so much easier when you don’t need to think.’

Beesely turned to Blaum. ‘Don’t keep your problems private, Max. We need to have a closer relationship.’

‘For what ... purpose, exactly?’

‘You’ll be President some day soon.’

‘I will?’ Blaum puzzled.

‘He will?’ Mike asked.

‘Don’t you want to be President?’ Beesely asked.

‘I ... have not thought about it.’

‘Every politician,’ Dame Helen insisted, ‘thinks about that at some point.’

Blaum carefully studied Beesely. ‘Are you suggesting that you ... help me?’

‘Hell no. I’m just suggesting we rig the election.’ They laughed.

‘You are serious?’ Blaum pressed.

‘If you want it, it is yours. I’ve done my research, the Society is behind me.’

‘The Society ... endorse me?’ Blaum questioned.

‘History in the making,’ Mike noted.

‘Corruption in the making,’ Helen noted.

‘The Swiss are not corrupt,’ Blaum insisted. ‘They just do not report crime as well as some other countries.’ They laughed. ‘You know what I really want to do?’ he asked, looking across at Beesely and pointing. ‘Your rescue force.’

‘It’s yours any time you like. Just make sure that your successor is not so good at reporting crime.’ They chuckled.

‘Hey,’ Helen called. ‘Get that guard in the corner over here in the light.’ She tapped Beesely’s leg. ‘You’ll like this.’

Johno signalled the man over, the man stepping into the light. ‘Hey!’ he quietly called. ‘You trying to take the piss out of me?’

Thomas laughed, as did the others. The guard’s moustache was a ‘Johno’.

‘No, sir,’ the guard insisted as Beesely stood and turned. ‘I have this for one year. It is common for Germany and Switzerland.’

‘There’s *your* doppelganger!’ Helen told Johnno, laughing. ‘Get some more of them and send them out in the town.’

Beesely turned, mock concern on his face. ‘God, Helen, we have to live and work in this town. They close their businesses now when they see *him* coming. The car dealerships run away shrieking.’

The guard laughed, earning a glare from Johnno. ‘Sorry, sir, but it is true. Many the stories and jokes about Herr Johnno’s driving,’ he explained, his head lowered.

‘Tell me one,’ Johnno insisted.

The guard glanced around the faces. ‘How many Johnno’s does it take to screw in the light bulb?’ They waited. ‘Johnno cannot reach the light bulb from the car, so he destroys the house first with the car, lifting the light-fitting from the floor and swapping the bulb.’ The group were hysterical.

Johnno just stared, finally grinning. ‘That’s good. I like it.’ He stopped grinning. ‘Cheeky bastards.’

Beesely beckoned the guard with a hook finger. ‘I want you go up to the managers. Get a team of men to follow you, dress like Johnno and travel around the local area. Drive a silver Mercedes. But be careful, there are irate husbands and car dealers to avoid. Oh, and I want any more Johnno jokes emailed to me. Go!’ The guard stepped out.

‘Don’t go encouraging them,’ Johnno quipped.

An hour later the only two drinkers remaining were Johnno and Dame Helen, the good lady not so keen to let go of her wine glass.

‘What’s it like?’ she asked after several seconds spent studying him. ‘Being shot.’

‘Too quick to worry about for the most part,’ he said with a sigh. ‘It feels like being punched hard, then a warm

numb feeling. Then, depending where you're hit, some pain or not.'

'Pain ... or not?'

'If you're hit in a muscle, like the arm, the trauma force – the shock wave going through your flesh – makes it all go numb. Like a dead leg after being punched. What hurts is the secondary stuff, like being hit in the stomach.' He gazed into his beer. 'The body's chemicals get mixed up, stuff going where it wasn't designed to go. That hurts. Like someone pouring acid into your veins.'

'I never thought I'd ever feel like a soldier on the front line,' she softly admitted.

'Your *job* ... got you into that wheelchair, love.'

She nodded slowly. 'Not something I ever expected. No senior intelligence officers have ever been in harms way.' She let out a big breath. 'I set a precedent.'

'Don't take this the wrong way, love, but fuckers like you have been sending people like me out into *harms way* for hundreds of years. Many not to return.'

She lifted her head and stared back for a second, before looking away. 'Yes,' she blew out, reflecting on Johnno's words. 'It does give me a new appreciation for what goes on.'

'Well, you're now an honouree member of her Majesties Armed Forces wounded club.' He toasted her with his glass. She made no comment. 'Took some balls for you to come here, in your state,' he softly added. She frowned a question back at him. 'You should be back in the UK, crying your eyes out. Yet here you are, accepting our dubious hospitality. Even after everything that's happened to you, you're still on the clock.'

'On the clock?'

'Playing head of MI6, keeping an eye on us,' Johnno said with a knowing grin.

'You're not as stupid as you look, are you.'

He smiled widely. ‘And you, my lady, are still a pleasant sight for the eye, even with the bruises and the wheelchair.’

She blinked, then scowled at him. ‘You’re drunk.’

‘Nope. Not even close, love.’ She stared back. Johno added, ‘First time you turned up at the house – lousy stiff outfit – it did nothing for you. I’d burn that one, you looked a hundred years old.’ Her eyes widened. ‘But the second time – sweat-shirt and jeans – very nice. Nothing better ... than a quality bird dressed scruffy.’

‘Quality bird?’ she repeated, trying to hide an amused grin.

‘Well educated, top job in the UK.’ He smirked and tipped his head.

She gazed into her glass. ‘Not feeling such a *quality bird* at the moment.’

‘Victim syndrome,’ he stated, a cold edge to his voice. ‘It’ll pass. Trust me, I know. Right now you’re feeling violated, helpless, wanting to strike back ... and busy being angry at yourself for letting your kid die. There’s a solution. Stop feeling sorry for yourself, and focus on getting mad at the bad guys and getting even. If you don’t get a handle on that, and quick, it’ll eat you up for years, babes.’

She studied her drink. ‘You know, I read your file, after the first time we met.’ She lifted her eyes. ‘You’re not the person described in that file.’

‘What can you learn from a school report, eh?’ he joked. He took a breath. ‘Your old man, Mike, he don’t seem to know how to handle you ... if you don’t mind me saying.’

Without looking up she asked, ‘And how would you... *handle me?*’

‘What you need is a night out, a few drinks and some loud music so that you can forget yourself in the crowd. Then a quick tasty kebab and a good shag.’

She laughed, a hand quickly to her mouth. ‘If you can get your mind out of the gutter long enough, Sergeant, push me back me back to my room.’

‘Want a Kebab first?’

3

Assassins did not, as a rule, toot their horns as they approached their intended victims, but Herr Mole tooted the horn of the hire Lexus again as he navigated slowly up a dirt track to an isolated log cabin in *upstate* New York. Agent Schooner drew his pistol and peered out of the window from behind net curtains, noting a light blue Lexus labouring slowly up the dirt track. Confident that this was nothing dangerous he gave the rear of the cabin a quick check and locked the solid wood door.

Back at the front windows he watched, suddenly startled that no one appeared to be driving the car. His grip on his pistol tightened before he noticed the head of someone in the driving seat. Were they hiding, he wondered.

The Lexus slowed and pulled up, just nudging a fence pole, slipping back a little before the handbrake was applied.

He frowned. *Who the hell was driving?*

Herr Mole opened the door and stepped out, Schooner glancing at the wall calendar. This cabin was hired out intermittently, especially when he was away.

The cabin had been left to him by his uncle, a welcome weekend retreat and a great meeting place for persons of his persuasion. Now he studied the scribbled marks; it was not down as being rented, but mistakes had been made

before, the owner of the motel on the highway handling the bookings.

‘Idiot!’ He cursed the man. Quickly, he checked the rear again, stuffed the pistol down his back and stepped out. Squinting in the late afternoon sun he checked the tree line as he stepped down and onto the dirt track.

‘Hey there!’ he called, as friendly as he could make it sound, waving at the odd little man limping towards him.

‘Parle vous Francias?’ Herr Mole offered with a wave.

‘Fucking great,’ Schooner muttered. ‘You er ... you speak English, buddy?’

Now the little Frenchman stood just a few yards away.

‘Yes, I am speaking the English,’ Mole replied.

A familiar ‘crack’ registered just before Schooner felt his knee give way. Cursing himself for walking so easily into a trap he reached for his pistol. Before his hand got anywhere near the weapon his other knee buckled, another crack echoing off the trees. He fell forwards as the pain started to register.

The little man continued to step forwards. Schooner turned on his side and reached for his pistol. Another crack, his arm flying back around towards his head, his elbow shattered and his arm now limp. The little man stopped level with Schooner’s head, the CIA agent unable to lift his head higher than could afford him a view of Herr Mole’s legs.

‘Bastard!’ Schooner spat out.

‘I have some questions for you, my friend.’ All of a sudden the little man’s English sounded a great deal better. And his accent was suddenly Germanic.

‘Screw ... you,’ Schooner got out in a strained whisper.

The little man knelt onto Schooner’s remaining good hand. Lifting his head Schooner could now see a miniature blowlamp, no bigger than his attacker’s hand. With a quiet

roar a small blue flame appeared, little more than an inch long.

‘You’re K2,’ he spat out.

‘He is,’ came a voice, an east coast American accent.

Schooner strained his neck to see. There stood a man in camouflage gear, holding a M4 assault rifle with a long silencer and telescopic sight. Feeling betrayed he demanded, venom in his voice, ‘Who sent you?’

The American answered, ‘Beesely sent me. And I’ll make you this promise. Answer the first question correctly ... and you get a shot to the back of the head.’

Schooner considered his options, lowering his face to the cool dirt. For several seconds he studied an ant labouring along with a leaf way too big for it. He had considered this day for many years; when, and where it might happen. Well, here it was - that day. ‘Kirkpatrick,’ he let out. ‘Fuck ‘im.’

‘James Kirkpatrick, Section Chief, Research and Development, Langley?’

‘Yeah, fucker. God of the doomsday scenarios.’

The little man stood up and stepped back. A crack and Schooner felt his lower jaw disintegrate; teeth, bone and blood now a half-inch from his eyes. Another crack, the good elbow gone. Footsteps. They were leaving. And he would be remaining.

That day. That day would be a very long day.

4

Edwardo Maurice, the head of the Marseille mafia, had finished eating and now sat listening to a discussion on the merits of the European Union, his family and friends sat around a long table. His sons were equally balanced, for and against even tighter control of French life by the Brussels bureaucrats. Twenty people remained assembled

at this harbour-side restaurant; most family, some 'employees'.

A man in a white shirt appeared at the door, beckoning a sleepy waiter to him. He whispered in the waiter's ear. The waiter straightened, before walking quickly to Edwardo as two 'employees' stepped closer to the visitor.

The young waiter stood behind Edwardo, bent low and whispering into the ear of the boss. 'Sir, this man says he is an envoy from the director of K2 in Switzerland.'

Edwardo snapped upright, his sudden movement noticed by the ensemble. With a curious frown he waved the visitor over and to a seat. After a careful visual inspection of the visitor he cordially offered, 'Food? Some wine?'

'No, thank you, sir,' the visitor politely declined, his accent local, but refined.

Edwardo eased back. 'So, you work for the boss of K2?' he asked.

'Yes, sir. And he desires to convey to you that he wishes you every success in your ... *dispute* with certain Paris ... *gentlemen*.'

The boss glanced at his number two, concerned, then back to the visitor. After a moment's reflection he asked, 'And how much ... *success* does he wish for us?'

'Complete success, sir. Which is why he has made available sophisticated weapons, information and ... twenty million dollars.'

Edwardo and his number two again exchanged looks. 'That is a lot of ... success, he wishes. Why, in particular, does he wish *us* this success.'

'The gentlemen in Paris attracted his displeasure, sir.'

Edward made a face and gave a large, Gallic shrug, before sipping his wine. 'When does he wish us to ... talk with the gentlemen in Paris?'

‘Tomorrow, sir.’ Edwardo raised his eyebrows. The visitor added, ‘In the morning you will have five million good wishes. And every week, if ... progress is good.’

‘The gods have sent us a gift,’ Edwardo said to no one in particular. ‘An opportunity not to be missed.’ He tipped his head at his number two, who hurriedly left the restaurant.

* * *

‘Hey, Dick,’ Bambitou quietly offered as he entered.

His assistant gave him a look. ‘Don’t know why I’m so good to you.’

‘Maybe it’s because you’re my assistant? Paid to *assist* me.’

‘Oh, yeah. Forgot.’

He smiled ‘What you got?’

‘State Trooper killed, upstate New York. Shot went through his windscreen, through him and kept going. Teflon.’

Bambitou rubbed his chin. ‘What was he doing?’

‘Nothing, just on patrol. Car crash suggests he was hit as he drove, from ahead.’

‘Those he was pursuing were pros.’

‘Could be. Anyway, they did a sweep of the area, spoke to residents and farmers, found one lonely cabin with a man in critical condition, splayed out face down near the cabin.’

‘And?’

She raised a finger. ‘Pistol stuffed down his back, not fired recently. Shot in each knee-cap and elbow, then through the jaw, in situ’ - left to the worms.’

‘Nasty. A punishment, not an execution.’

‘Still alive, critical. Oh, he’s on the *list*, by the way.’

‘And his ... gainful occupation.’

She glanced up, winking. 'Computer refers all enquirers to the Department of Defense.' He walked to the door, stopped and turned. 'Oh,' she said. 'Email for you. Death threat.'

'File it with all the others.'

Making new friends

1

Beesely sat hunched over the desk reading a file, Johnno cleaning his MP5. Otto sat reviewing documents, intermittently offering some up for Beesely to cast an eye over. Thomas was keenly observing Johnno, making comments when he remembered just what should go where. It was 9am and calm.

‘Sir, there is an unauthorised helicopter approaching!’ burst from the desk phone.

‘Cliff top!’ Johnno firmly stated out without detracting from his educational activities.

Beesely pressed a button. ‘Have the cliff top outpost cover it, but do not fire unless they are hostile. What type of helicopter is it?’

‘French-made Squirrel, sir. As with ours.’

Beesely turned to Johnno.

‘Four soldiers at best,’ Johnno informed him, unconcerned.

Thomas ran around and called up the image on the computer screen, Beesely and Otto peering over his shoulder, the lad now adept at selecting the various images. The helicopter slowed, eased lower and landed on the grass to the west of the office block. As they observed, a man and a woman, both smartly dressed, jumped out and walked towards a waiting Range Rover. Thomas adjusted and selected the images as the vehicle brought them the short distance to the castle.

‘Sir?’ came from the phone.

‘Yes?’

‘They are DGSE, sir. French Secret Service.’

‘About bloody time,’ Johnno muttered.

‘Check for weapons and listening devices. Politely. Then my office.’ He drummed his fingers for a few idle seconds then scribbled a note. He handed it to Otto, who immediately stepped out. Johnno started to assemble his MP5.

Beesely remained seated as the French entered, Otto following his lead.

The woman appeared to be in her late thirties, smartly dressed in a dark blue suit with a white blouse. Her features were pleasant, yet businesslike. She held herself with confidence and authority and seemed to be the superior of the man accompanying her. ‘Mister Beesely, I am Geraldine Nouveau, DGSE, Paris. This is Jacque Iconou,’ she said in excellent English.

Beesely sat back and gestured them towards seats as Dame Helen wheeled herself in. She took up her station next to Otto as the guests sat.

‘You are Herr Otto Schessel,’ Ms Nouveau noted, tipping her head politely at Otto, her colleague repeating the gesture. Then she turned the other way to Johnno. ‘You must be Sergeant John Williams.’

Johnno gave her a childish wave. ‘Getting used to hairy armpits.’

She frowned slightly before turning to Dame Helen. ‘I am sorry, Madame, but I do not recognise you.’

‘Dame Helen Eddington-Small,’ she coldly announced.

Ms Nouveau’s eyes widened. She glanced at Beesely, before turning back to Dame Helen, clearly caught off guard. ‘You... are the director of MI6?’

‘On sick leave.’ She tapped her plastic leg cast.

‘Apologies, madam. And on behalf of the French Security Services ... condolences for your loss.’

‘Thank you,’ Dame Helen curtly responded. ‘Why are you here?’

Beesely glanced at the side of Dame Helen's head, hid a smile and turned his gaze back to the visitors.

Ms Nouveau delicately asked, 'May I be so bold as to enquire, Madame, your link to this organization?'

'The British Government and security services work very closely in co-operation with Sir Morris Beesely.' Ms Nouveau considered it very carefully as Dame Helen asked her, 'Why are *you* here?' Amused, Beesely folded his arms.

Ms Nouveau organized her thoughts. 'Last night a Marseille criminal gang was approached and offered a large sum to attack a Paris criminal gang - apparently on behalf of this organization. That was the subject of a high level meeting this morning. I am here to clarify matters before arrest warrants are considered.'

'So,' Dame Helen began, 'you have people watching criminal gangs in your country?'

'Of course.'

'And you didn't notice the other week that Paris gangs were helping launch a large-scale terrorist attack on Swiss soil?'

'I cannot discuss such operational matters -'

'Well either you knew or you didn't,' Dame Helen pressed, getting louder. 'If you did know, and didn't warn the Swiss, they will issue arrest warrants for *you*.'

Minister Blaum walked in and pulled out a chair so that he sat behind Dame Helen, next to Otto.

'Minister Blaum,' Ms Nouveau noted with a polite tip of her head, a slight reddening of her cheeks.

'Did I miss something?' Blaum asked.

'Yes,' Dame Helen replied without turning. 'This lady, from the French DGSE, was about to admit to complicity in the criminal attack on a Swiss bank last week.'

Ms Nouveau straightened, annoyed.

Blaum stated, 'If that is correct then our visitors will be arrested and held.'

The visitors glanced at each other.

'Sir?' buzzed from the phone.

'Yes?'

'George Holmes, Director CIA, sir.'

'Put him through.'

'Sir Morris?'

'Yes, George, how are you?'

'Up very early to make this call.'

'How's the President?'

'Good. He's very grateful for your assistance.'

'Listen, George, some bad news for you. Well, there is, as they say, good news and bad news.'

'Let's have the good news first.'

Beesely made firm eye contact with Ms Nouveau. 'The good news is that I am one of yours, and you can be assured of my loyalty and service, George. Not to mention discretion.'

'That's good to know. What's the bad news?'

'Your Paris chief, Mister Emerson, is dirty.'

'Christ!' He paused. 'How ... dirty are we talking here?'

'Would cost you your job, George.'

There was a pause. 'Christ! Was he involved in that stuff the other week?'

'Up to his armpits, George. He relieved Boris Luchenkov of half a billion dollars.' The visitors glanced at each other.

'Beesely, is there something you can ... do?'

'Already in progress, this will never see the light of day. And no need for you to discuss this ... higher up, if you know what I mean.'

'I know what you mean.'

‘Bear with me, George. I’ll clean house as best as I can.’

‘Appreciate it, Beesely. Dinner at the White House when you’re ready.’

Beesely closed in on the phone. ‘Listen, George, I need you to keep something in mind for the next few days, just between you and me. I’m in Switzerland, be here for the next few days.’

‘Oh, OK.’

‘Talk soon. Bye.’ He hung up and turned to Ms Nouveau. ‘I’m sorry, you were saying something before we were interrupted?’ As a matter of accidental timing, Johnno cocked his MP5.

She glanced at her colleague. ‘I ... will have to consult with my superiors, sir.’

Her mobile phone rang, startling her. ‘Apologies, sir, I did not think it would work down here.’

‘We have boosters, and I suggest that you answer it. Could be important.’

Everyone focused on her, her cheeks reddening as she lifted her phone. ‘Yes ... sir ... yes ... sir ... sir ... will do, sir.’ She folded her flip-phone.

‘Sounded important,’ Beesely casually noted.

She forced a large breath. ‘Our Security Minister wishes to convey his apologies ... for not sharing relevant information with you about various criminal gangs, where the information could have been of use to you. We will, of course, co-operate fully in future.’

‘That’s good to know,’ Beesely enthused. He turned his head and smiled. ‘Thomas, if you please.’ Thomas walked up to the computer screen and zoomed in on the helicopter.

The French pilot now stood chatting to a guard fifty yards from his helicopter, both of them smoking. The drone of

another helicopter was of immediate interest to him, the man glancing around to see what it was. Coming in low across the lake the black Apache approached like a stalking cat. 'Apache!' he noted.

'We have a squadron of them,' the guard keenly informed him.

The Apache nosed up and climbed to a hundred feet, banking as it approached the west end of the compound, a droning roar bouncing off the hillside and resonating, making it sound more like three helicopters. Now heading parallel to the lakeshore its chain gun turned and focussed, the pilot pointing at the movement, keenly interested. Then he stopped smiling.

The Apache let loose with a ten second burst as it passed, a deafening roar sounding similar to a sustained slip gear in a old car, shell casings falling into the lake.

The DGSE Squirrel splintered into a thousand pieces before bursting into flames. The Apache banked hard and dropped to just a few metres above the lake surface as it eased away across the lake, showing its rear to the French pilot with a wiggle of its tail rotor, its point made; it had scent-marked its territory, peed on its spot, seen off the interloper.

The guard lifted the pilot to his feet, dusting him off, before forcibly turning him to face what remained of his helicopter.

Two large bangs, fifty calibre rounds, were closely followed by large chunks flying off the helicopter; they echoed around the hills, coming back twice before dissipating. Then a missile streaked down from the cliff-top and hit the Squirrel, doubling the flames.

The guard continued to politely dust down the pilot as other guards randomly took shots at the helicopter.

Ms Nouveau was on her feet, along with her colleague, staring at the images from the second screen, their mouths hanging open. A manager walked in and silently handed her three train tickets.

Beesely stood. 'Well, if there's nothing else, young lady, I believe you have a train to catch. And, unlike British trains, these are always on time. Swiss, you see.'

After the guests had been shown out, tea and coffee was brought in.

Blaum forced a few breaths, forcing himself to calm down. He said, 'That helicopter ...'

'Will disappear,' Beesely reassured him. 'If they give you any hassle we will buy them a new one.'

'OK,' Blaum finally agreed, still breathing heavily. 'Now I *must* go.'

Dame Helen stood up and hugged him. 'You take care.'

'I will probably be back soon,' he suggested, giving Beesely a sideways glance. He waved collectively at the room.

Beesely sat. 'Right, ten minute break, then we take a pop at the big player.'

'Paris Chief?' Dame Helen asked.

'Not sure you should be here for this,' Beesely pointed out.

'Hell, I'm up to my armpits in this already. You fall - I fall.'

'Best make sure I don't fall then. Break, everyone. Break.'

* * *

A quick check of his boat before work was common for Kirkpatrick, the marina just a half-mile from the Pentagon.

At the moment his time was split between his office here, with the Department of Defense, and at Langley. Here was preferable, he had quick access to the love of his life.

The gate guard nodded and greeted him. Kirkpatrick smiled back at the man, someone he could rely on to call in a storm to check the boat's tethers. As he walked along the narrow wooden boards he noticed an Air Force colonel in uniform checking another boat.

Another fifty yards and there he was. His boat ... was submerged. He stood and stared, bullet holes visible, lots of them.

Mississippi

1

The smartly dressed Englishman raised his head from his paper, making brief eye contact with an elderly Jewish couple sat opposite. The couple put down their drinks and stood as the Englishman went back to his newspaper, the slow moving couple stepping outside the Red Roof Inn, Brandon, Mississippi, just east of Jackson.

It was a small roadside hotel, less than fifty rooms - some in the main structure, some motel style. Keeping an eye on strangers would be easy enough.

An oddly dressed elderly man walked in, flanked by four large men in suits, and up to the desk.

‘Yes, sir, how may I help you today?’ the young lady clerk enquired, a smile as bright as her blue-and-red uniform.

‘Beesely is my name, Sir Morris Beesely from London, England.’

She smiled politely, checking the computer for a reservation. ‘Yes, sir. You are booked in for two days, standard room with breakfast.’ She glanced at the four security men, forcing the smile to remain cemented in place, and processed the visitor’s arrival.

‘How will you be paying –’

She had hardly uttered the words when the well-dressed elderly man plonked down a wad of hundred-dollar bills on the counter.

A crack sounded.

In slow motion the man’s mouth seemed to open and vomit forth blood and teeth at her. She felt the pain in her arm a moment later as the old man dropped down below the height of the counter, leaving her with the image of a

car halted outside, a window wound down, a man with a rifle.

The car sped off as the security men started running. Screams went up, not least those coming from her own lungs as she lost control of her own body.

The smartly dressed Englishman rushed outside, the Jewish couple now cowering. 'Are you alright?' he enquired, kneeling next to them. 'Get them?' he whispered.

The old man raised his magazine, revealing the end of a camera lens.

* * *

Bambitou walked back into his office, coffee in hand, a black tea for Tracey.

'Quick, quick,' she whispered, waving him over.

He ambled across and placed her drink down.

She quickly added, 'Just got this, emailed to you personally from a dead-stop email address.' She called up the image of a man with a rifle leaning out of a car; his face, and that of his driver, clearly visible.

'So?'

'It says ... Brandon, Mississippi. So I checked the wire: drive by shooting, Red Roof Hotel, Brandon, Mississippi. -' she looked up, smiling excitedly. '- half an hour ago!'

He straightened. 'Get those two suspects out to all agencies and our Mississippi branch.'

'Wait, there's more,' she said, excited. 'The email says *Go to Mississippi, University Genetics Department. Wait. And this is where it gets a bit foggy.*' She called up more screens. 'Guy shot in Brandon was a New York stage actor named Rufus O'Connor, booked in as a Sir Morris Beesely.'

'Some sort of identity scam?'

‘Hold onto your hats. This is where it gets interesting. One, Sir Morris Beesely is English –’

‘Of course.’

She shot him a look. ‘Says here, Born in Church-Fenton, England. Served with British Army, Guards, then Special Air Service –’

‘Hold it, that’s SAS ... counter terrorism unit?’

‘Yep. Then the rest is down as Government Service, which could mean anything - such as British Secret Service. So I did a little digging.’

‘And?’

She suddenly seemed apologetic. ‘Sorry, Boss.’

‘Boss? When the hell have you ever called me ‘boss’? What ya done, Tracey?’

‘I used your access codes to check him out,’ she explained, a pained and apologetic expression offered.

‘And?’

‘Three emails came back straight away, wanting to know why we are enquiring. Director CIA, Director FBI and the White House.’ Bambitou slumped into a chair. ‘Sorry, Boss. You’re wanted in Washington, like ... right away.’

‘Get me a flight to Mississippi,’ he quietly stated. ‘Book me a room.’

‘Oh, Red Roof. Got the details here.’

2

Emerson was handcuffed and barefoot and now wearing a tracksuit provided for him, albeit a little short in the leg. His eye was bruised and a lip cut, his eyes heavy and sunken, the result of the wrong dosage of tranquilliser from Leponte’s amateur experiments with chemistry. He angrily shrugged off the guards as they threw him into a

chair in front of Beesely's desk, threatening looks for his captors.

'Tea, coffee?' Beesely pleasantly enquired.

'Screw you!' he quietly let out.

'I would have thought,' Beesely began, 'that the sight of your friend, Mister –'

'Preston,' Otto assisted him.

'Mister Preston, that you would be a little more co-operative, Mister Emerson.'

'You won't touch me!' he confidently snarled.

'Why? Just because you are four ranks above him?'

Emerson was surprised, but soon regained his angry expression.

Beesely poured him a tea anyway. 'Correct me if I am wrong, but there are another three ranks above you, not including the director, who is appointed by the President?'

'Fascinating insight,' Emerson spat out.

'And above him there is the President, and above the President is ... those who play golf in a Virginia Lodge.'

Emerson straightened. 'Who have you been getting intel' from, not the bitch here?'

Beesely followed his look towards Dame Helen, sat in her wheelchair, before emptying the scalding hot liquid into Emerson's lap. Emerson controlled his pain and struggled as Beesely sat back down. 'No, young man, not from this good lady. You see, young man, I spent a long time playing golf in Virginia.'

Dame Helen was listening intently.

Emerson squinted. 'You? You were MI6, just that! And that was a hundred years ago.'

Johno laughed loudly.

'So you are meant to believe. I would not expect you to know me since you are not *top table*.' He rapped his desk with his knuckles.

Emerson now seemed more confused than angered. 'Who do you know on the top table?' he challenged.

'Certainly knew the chairman, Oliver Stanton, before your lot killed him.'

'What?' Emerson called in a strained whisper. 'He's dead?'

'Killed by Henry O'Sullivan, who I'm sure you know.' Emerson lowered his head, thinking hard. Beesely continued, 'Of course, when Henry's actions were discovered he was ... *let go* ... by the top table. Heart attack, terrible shame. I sent a card. Then the new temporary chairman, David, was killed. Single gunshot to the head.'

'No chairman has ever been killed,' Emerson muttered, as if that was a mark of great achievement by The Lodge, something that had made it stand out against other, similar organizations.

'And now three dead,' Beesely calmly noted. 'So far, that is. Perhaps, young man, things have gone too far.' Beesely eased back into his chair.

Emerson raised his head, a pained expression. 'Who are you?'

'I was, a long time ago, personal agent to the chairman.' Emerson was visibly shocked. 'Later I became British representative, then deputy chairman.' Helen listen to that with keen interest.

Emerson sat forwards, shaking his head. 'No, no, that can't be.'

'It's all falling down around you, Mister Emerson. The chain of command is out of kilter. And that cannot be a good thing.'

'If you are who you say you are, you know Tipping Point is being reached,' Emerson insisted, staring oddly out of focus.

'Who do you think wrote the original report?'

Emerson's eyes widened. 'You?' he accused with his tone.

'With this hand I pen these words with a heavy heart, my fear for the future herein described. Yes, young man, I wrote it. The three tipping points: one, the oil economy, two, the Middle East, three, a climate change.'

'And they'll converge in five years or less!' Emerson claimed, almost pleading.

'I know when they will converge, so do others. But unlike you, some of us still have hope for the future. Some of us think that mankind will surprise itself and actually do something sensible. Like ... saving its own neck.'

'Hah!' Emerson coughed out, avoiding eye contact.

A manager stepped in quickly, handing Beesely a note before retreating.

Beesely read it. 'Mister Schooner in critical condition.' He read on, Emerson glancing up briefly. 'Oh, nasty. That had to hurt. Glass, entrails around the room. Nasty. Preston, tortured and killed. Welt, broken neck, paralysed, but still alive. Oh, dear, Mr. Kirkpatrick's boat sank.' Emerson raised his head. 'But he was not on it, unfortunately.'

'They sank his boat?' Johnno quietly queried. 'Bastards.'

'And here is the kicker, Mister Emerson. This is where you ... get some unwarranted attention.' He turned one screen so that Emerson could view it as Otto typed commands into the other computer. 'Www dot sneaky bastards two dot com,' Beesely read from the paper. 'It's had twenty-five thousands hits so far,' he proudly announced. He turned to Otto. 'Hits?'

'Visitors.'

'Ah, good. Twenty-five thousand visitors.'

Johno jumped up and grabbed Emerson, pushing his face close to the screen. Clearly visible were a lot of faces he was familiar with.

‘What have you done?’ Emerson whispered.

Beesely teasingly explained, ‘We’ve created a website of everyone involved. Well, everyone on your side - dead and alive. They are visible for everyone to see - FBI, CIA, NSA and the White House. Not to mention CNN. An ... *expanding thumbnail gallery.*’

Emerson was horrified, staring wide-eyed at the screen. ‘You fucking idiot –’

Johno banged Emerson’s head into the desk. Twice. ‘Pay attention when the nice man is explaining stuff, like.’

Beesely eased back into his chair, swivelled and stood. ‘You see, Mr. Emerson, rats like you and your colleagues work best when in the dark. Out in the light they wilt and die.’

‘That’s mushrooms, Boss,’ Johno quietly pointed out, looking embarrassed for Beesely.

Beesely walked around the desk, hands in pockets. ‘What do you think your masters will do when they see that site? Which, by the way –’ he glanced at Otto. ‘- has your good self in there.’

Several images appeared, many of them Emerson naked and unconscious.

‘Oh, yuk!’ Johno shouted. ‘Fuck’s sake! Could have warned me!’ He pushed Emerson into his chair, guards closing in.

Beesely flicked his wrist at the guards. ‘Take him away.’ They dragged Emerson out.

3

Kirkpatrick sat staring at the website, all the lights on his desk phone now lit.

‘YOU HAVE EMAIL,’ sounded repeatedly from his computer, a female voice with mockingly kind and civil tones.

In front of him sprawled a pile of messages: British Government investigating US stem cell research, US research companies taken over by Swiss groups, all Swiss research facilities under investigation.

Preston missing, Emerson missing - his driver and bodyguard crushed to death. Now Emerson unconscious and naked on this website, next to Preston. Had they been tortured by K2? Had they given him up? With K2’s fondness for videoing their torture was an email attachment winging it’s way to the White House or the FBI?

Welt and Schooner tortured and killed, their photos on the website. What had they given up? Phillips and Daley not reporting in. Henry O’Sullivan dead, David dead. And strangest of all, no mention of the project. No mention of what these men were up to.

His door handle turned. Locked, a second later it was kicked in. Kirkpatrick closed his eyes for a moment, images of a cell in Leavenworth surfacing.

A sharp pain in his neck, a man stood there, a man he had seen many times before. He withdrew the dart, squinting at the man for a moment. He thought he remembered where he knew the man from, just before he lost consciousness. Mr. Grey, dressed as a paramedic, holstered the dart-gun.

Tipping point

1

‘So what’s that Tipping Point bollocks he was on about?’ Johnno asked, slumping in front of the desk, grabbing yet another of one of the unused drinks. Dame Helen wheeled herself closer.

Beesely sat. ‘It is ... a theoretical threshold, based on a number of factors, after which society breaks down and we all plunge into doom and darkness.’

‘And *you* wrote this?’ Dame Helen queried, concerned.

Beesely offered her two flat palms. ‘I did not make the world as it is, I simply quantified certain conditions which, when met, point towards a *tipping point* - a point beyond which it would be very hard to simply carry on as we are.’

‘So are we?’ Johnno asked. ‘At that point?’

‘In some areas, yes, in others ... no. There are a great many variables involved.’

‘And you wrote this report for the CIA?’ Dame Helen pressed.

Beesely reluctantly nodded. ‘In the sixties and seventies. And since then it has been refined and checked, but never refuted or proven wrong. Unfortunately.’

‘So what are the conditions?’ Dame Helen enquired. Otto turned his chair and made himself comfortable.

‘Three main ones: The oil economy and US deficit, the Middle East becoming a single state, and a sudden climatic event that causes mass migration - uncontrolled migration. And even back then we understood the dangers of global warming. Problem was, successive White House administrations refused to do anything.’

‘Because of an oil based economy,’ Dame Helen pointedly remarked.

Beesely tipped his head and raised his eyebrows, agreeing with her. 'All oil is sold around the world in dollars, and all the US Federal Reserve has to do is keep printing them to keep the US a superpower. Truth is, they are bankrupt, have been for a while.'

'Bankrupt?' Johnno repeated, a sceptical look.

Otto interjected, 'If all the dollars around the world returned to the US, and people demanded gold - or goods - for their dollars, there is not enough gold or goods to settle the debt. But that is disputed, since US assets are greater than the debt. Of course, selling American buildings and businesses to foreign debtors is not factored in - that would be stupid.'

Beesely nodded his agreement. 'China, technically, owns thirty percent of America - they hold so many dollars. Saudis own ten percent - that we know of.'

Johnno eased forwards. 'So what happens if China wants its dollars in gold?'

'America would be bankrupt overnight,' Beesely pointed out.

'The Chinese would not do that,' Dame Helen suggested. 'They wouldn't want to have their largest customer stop buying from them.'

'But it has to stop somewhere,' Otto suggested. 'It cannot keep going like this. It will reach breaking point. Or, *tipping point*.'

'How long?' Johnno asked, keenly interested.

'Less than twenty years,' Otto replied. 'According to some studies.'

Johnno focused on Otto. 'Just when you think your own problems are difficult to solve, something else even bigger pops up, eh?'

Otto stared back, unsure as to what Johnno was referring to, Beesely glancing from Otto to Johnno. Dame Helen lowered her head, deep into her own thoughts.

After a moment Johnno turned his head a notch toward Beesely and asked, 'So what are the sneaky shits going to do before that point?'

'Keep finding oil, for one,' Beesely pointed out, Otto still focused on Johnno.

'No matter whose garden it's in,' Johnno said with a sigh. 'Or who they have to kill to get access to it.'

'That's a short term consideration, yes,' Beesely admitted. 'But they are looking at a battlefield with many factors in play.'

'How does the middle east affect the oil economy?' Dame Helen asked. 'I thought oil would last there for another fifty years?'

'It may do,' Beesely began. 'The prediction of doom and gloom is one of a greater Islamic state, stretching from Pakistan to Morocco. For most of the past thirty years those in the know propped up the Iraqis, because they are the key for the whole region, the centrepiece. If they turn into a unified Islamic state then the domino effect will be unstoppable, according to some CIA reports. Best policy for the CIA has been to keep the Sunni Muslims strong and in power, not the Shia. The so-called 'war on terror' against Saddam made things much worse and moved us a step closer to that Middle-East tipping point.'

'Why's that a problem?' Johnno scoffed. 'They don't have the firepower to take on the West. Manpower, yeah, if you count the cannon fodder. And most of the time they fight amongst themselves.'

'That's where the climate comes in,' Beesely explained as he rubbed the bridge of his nose. 'If global warming goes up just a few more degrees then most of that area gets real toasty –'

'Then all those fuckers will want a flat in Islington!' Johnno suggested. 'Willing, this time, to fight their way in, not sneak in.'

‘Yes,’ Beesely sighed. ‘They will move north, both into Europe and Russia.’

Dame Helen raised her eyebrows. ‘Hence the Russian interest, they can see it as well.’

‘They have their own studies, similar to mine, similar conclusions. And *they* are more worried than the CIA. They ... have the inviting wide open spaces of the Russian Steppes.’

‘Can’t stop global warming,’ Johnno suggested in a resigned tone.

Beesely faced him. ‘Probably not. Another problem is that most of the predicted *new-discovery* oil reserves of the next fifty years are either in little neutral countries or disputed areas. Like the Arctic or Antarctic.’

‘Which is why we fought for the Falklands,’ Johnno put in. ‘Staging area for a mad scramble for oil in the Antarctic.’

‘So the cold war may well hot up again,’ Dame Helen thought out aloud. ‘And this time with China a major player.’

‘And India,’ Beesely added. ‘Plus some reports have Brazil becoming the super-power of the South Americas, its economy and resources have *huge* potential, not least for ethanol production and export.’

Johnno stood. ‘So, before doomsday and the big firework display, all these idiots will be posturing and getting into best position.’

‘Killing Eskimos and Mississippi blacks,’ Dame Helen said with a snarl. ‘Do these idiots really think that will make a difference?’

‘Unfortunately, my dear, some of these idiots take it very seriously, hence the recent problems. If they are this frisky *now*, just think what they will be like in ten or twenty years’ time. It’s all about planning ahead.’

‘Can it be fixed?’ Otto asked in a saddened tone.

Beesely considered Otto's unborn child and wife-to-be, the wedding postponed again. 'If you believe that common sense will break out across the world.'

Johnno opened the fridge and grabbed a beer. 'We're doomed then.'

Dame Helen wheeled herself square to Beesely. 'You wrote the damn report,' she quietly stated. 'Do you think there is a solution?'

'Several, my dear,' he answered with a warm smile. 'I wrote the *damn* report that started all this, least I could do is try and help. And we are off to a good start. But when you get back, I don't think your desk will be as clear as you might like it.'

'So what's your theory?' Johnno asked, loudly opening a can.

'I wrote a thesis on it for the NSA in 1985. It was not well received, but understood by those capable of understanding it.'

'And?' Johnno nudged.

'Simple. We are already seeing it now. I called it Reversed Economic Migration. At the moment we see people moving from poor countries to rich in order to find work.'

Johnno snorted, 'Or in the case of the UK, moving to a flat in Islington to sit on their arses and take the dole, because we're too damn soft.'

Beesely shot him an unfriendly look. 'That's one way of looking at it. But I have read some reports that suggest that our low-paid migrants are boosting the UK economy, by quite a chunk.'

'So what's the Reverse theory?' Dame Helen asked.

'Simple. Many Brits buy homes in Portugal, some live there permanently, their kids even go to school there. What are the chances of Britain attacking and bombing the Algarve?'

‘None,’ Dame Helen said firmly, ‘because of the social and financial integration.’

‘Exactly. Rich Russians are moving to Western Europe to buy football teams, Indian and African doctors have always moved to the West. Only a matter of time before rich Chinese start buying holiday homes in Bournemouth! And then ... boys and girls, it starts to get harder for countries to fight. People stop flag waving, give up their original country and go where the best opportunities are - citizens of the world, drifting after the work and schools. At that point, or some degree of it greater than thirty percent, we’ll see a shift from country to self. The individual is more interested in self and family than nationhood.

‘There are those who believe that the solution is simpler, that China won’t fight America. After all, what bank goes and shoots its customers? If they sit down and restructure the debt then they should find a solution to the benefit of all sides. Problem is American pride, and the lack of travel abroad by Americans. Some, like the CIA think-tanks, see war as a better option - the customer shoots the bank manager, and therefore doesn’t need to pay back the debt.’

2

‘Sir, your special visitor is here,’ buzzed from the phone.

‘Send him in please, fresh tea and coffee, thanks.’ Beesely straightened his tie.

‘*Special* visitor?’ Johnno repeated with a quizzical frown.

Beesely stood. ‘Mister Emerson was correct, no chairman of The Lodge has ever been killed. You don’t get to that position by being second rate, and you don’t hang on for fifteen years by being a bit slack.’

A white-haired man walked in, flanked by two smartly suited men with earpiece radios. 'Hello Johnno.'

Inch by inch Johnno slowly stood, his mouth opening. 'Oliver Stanton,' he quietly let out. 'Well I'll be bugged.' Shocked, Dame Helen stood up.

Stanton extended a hand to Helen and they shook. 'Please, rest your leg, Dame Helen. And ... thank you for everything you have done here these past few days.'

'You were watching?' she asked.

'Beesely kept me up to date without anyone noticing. Had to be done to flush out the conspirators.'

He turned to Otto and shook hands. 'Well done, Otto, excellent work.'

Otto bowed his head politely. 'Thank you for the Apache helicopters.'

'You're more than welcome.' He stepped around to Johnno. 'And you, young man. I read a psych' report on you not so long ago. They had you down as a manic depressive with suicidal tendencies. I think if those same shrinks had observed your last three weeks they'd have to eat their words.'

Nervously, Johnno said, 'You didn't see the thing with the tractor did you ... or the French lady?'

Stanton laughed loudly and shook Johnno's hand before turning to Beesely. 'And you, you old rogue. I had you down for a gonner several times recently, but you surprised me time and again.'

'One does one's best,' Beesely mocked him.

'A brilliant strategy. The stock markets, the website.' He turned to Johnno. 'And that speech - *we don't shoot the foot soldiers*. Christ, I never knew you had it in you, Johnno. You confounded them every time.'

His features hardened. 'And what you did in London.' He started to rap the desk with his knuckles. Beesely joined in, followed by Otto and even Dame Helen.

‘Remarkable, young man. Remarkable. You see, some people feel that this planet is screwed. Then we go and see examples of humanity like that. Remarkable.’

‘Or just plain stupid,’ Johno suggested with a shrug.

Stanton laughed. ‘You just carry on being stupid.’ He patted Johno’s arm as Thomas wandered in. Noticing the strange guards he saluted them.

‘And you, young man, spotted a spy and shot her,’ Stanton said in German. Thomas saluted again as Stanton sat.

Johno made eye contact with Otto. ‘You knew he was alive?’

‘Yes. But not why we had to hide him.’

Beesely explained, ‘We could not have pulled this off without Otto knowing some of it. Had to use K2 men to make Olly disappear, and stay disappeared from the world’s agencies.’

Dame Helen swivelled her wheelchair towards Beesely. ‘And me you obviously *didn’t* trust.’

He gave her an apologetic look. ‘Never knew if you were reporting back to the Prime Minister, or anyone else.’

‘And now?’ she pressed.

‘Now I would trust you with my life, or K2, my dear.’

She seemed genuinely touched. ‘Oh.’

‘You know about Mr. Grey?’ Johno asked Stanton, suddenly serious.

‘Alive and well, and shooting the hell out of the bad guys with his new best buddy Stateside,’ Stanton replied.

‘Oh.’ Johno frowned. ‘Who’s that?’

‘Herr Mole, of course. Another brilliant move.’

Beesely began, ‘I learnt long ago that secret agent types have a lot of pride. They don’t believe people like Herr Mole are spies or agents, because they don’t want to. It has always worked well for me.’

Johno blew out hard. 'Christ, if I saw Mole hobbling towards me on a dark night I'd shoot the strange little fucker.' They laughed. Johno added, 'So you gotta tell the wife now?'

'She knows, I discussed it with her before Beesely and I hatched this plan.'

'In the Bahamas,' Johno suggested.

Stanton nodded. 'Beesely landing up here was like a godsend. At first he didn't know if Otto was on the level, so Beesely had him give Mossad, CIA and MI6 –' he glanced at Dame Helen. '- a lot of money, to see how he would react. He didn't, so Beesely sent more money to Jewish foundations. Otto seemed on the level.' He became serious. 'And after the bomb, aimed at Otto, Beesely was sure about him.'

He turned to Dame Helen. 'When you didn't touch the money we had our doubts about you. Your predecessors would have had no problem with it.'

'Long time ago, maybe,' she insisted. 'Different structures now, no Lone Rangers.'

'Perhaps that's just as well,' he added. Then he made eye contact with Beesely. 'And that forgery you two set up to get you here ... Jesus, our best people went over that. Talk about brilliant. We found people who swore they knew them, your brother and his wife, Gunter's sister.'

Beesely glanced at Otto, smirking, then back to Stanton. 'You're not as smart as you might like to think you are, Mister Chairman.'

Stanton's brow furrowed. 'What do you mean? What you two been up to?'

'It is not a forgery,' Beesely explained, enjoying the look on Stanton's face.

'What?'

'It really did happen, Gunter was a relative.'

Stanton's eyebrows shot up. 'Wow. So the inheritance is genuine?'

'Of course not,' Beesely teased. 'You think Gunter would leave this to me - British Secret Service!'

'So ... how?'

Johno edged closer. 'Gunter sent his missus to try and recruit Beesely in 1963. He banged her, and Otto was the result.'

Beesely could not decide who was more shocked, Stanton or Dame Helen. Otto tipped his head when they stared at him, their mouths open.

'Life is strange sometimes,' Beesely commented, enjoying the moment.

'It is in this bleeding family,' Johno muttered.

Stanton focused on him. 'You're not!'

'I am.'

'Christ! I was surprised when Beesely kept you on, despite the injuries and attitude.'

'Hey, a moment ago I was *remarkable*!' Johno pointed out, wagging a finger.

Stanton shook his head. 'Fact stranger than fiction.' He faced Beesely. 'I guess I should not keep any more secrets from you either then. You know my late sister's oldest kid?' Beesely stopped smiling.

'Jesus,' Dame Helen quietly let out, rolling her eyes.

'Yep,' Stanton affirmed. 'I saw no purpose in saying anything before. She's a doctor in California.'

'There's another one of his upstairs,' Dame Helen pointed out. 'A London Detective.'

'God, Beesely —' Stanton began.

'It was the sixties,' Johno sarcastically informed him. 'And sex was a great stress reliever!'

Beesely leant forwards. 'If you have quite finished. Son.'

'Don't you *son* me! I'm remarkable, ya old git.'

Beesely shrugged towards Stanton. ‘You see now why I avoided telling them.’

Stanton roared with laughter.

Let's shoot some foot soldiers

1

Bambitou had waited for a dial tone. Nothing. He pressed the green button again and waited.

‘Are you the same gentleman we spoke to before?’ came a professional and detached female voice.

‘This is Special Agent Bambitou, New York FBI. You British Secret Service?’

‘One moment, please.’

‘This is Johnno. That you ... *Thadius*?’ came an English voice.

‘You been reading my file?’

‘Of course. And I liked what I read. You’re a real pain in the ass for your bosses, just like me.’

‘Good. So why am I in Jackson?’

‘University of Mississippi, Genetics Department, Sickle Cell programme. Need you to grab all their gene-therapy samples. Officially.’

‘Why?’

‘They were intercepted by ... white supremacists. Tainted.’

‘What?’ Bambitou shrieked.

‘You heard. Now, we need this done very quietly, Mister FBI man. We don’t want another race war, do we?’

‘What the fuck’s going on?’

‘Oh, and tell the genetics departments of each university and hospital in Mississippi-land ... that they will each get \$5million anonymously tomorrow.’

‘What’s going on? And what’s this got to do with Switzerland, British Intelligence and these CIA shits?’

‘Good question, can’t answer yet, maybe never. If you want to save a lot of lives you’ll help us.’

As he listened Bambitou observed the laboured progress of a very short, bald man with a limp. The man glanced at him once through thick-rimmed glasses.

‘How do I know you’re not jerking my chain?’ Bambitou demanded.

‘You seen the website?’

‘Yeah, all over fucking CNN. You do that?’

‘Yep. Now follow the evidence, FBI man. Then bury it as much as you can. We don’t want a fresh set of race wars, do we? My people will be close by.’ The phone went dead.

Bambitou had been standing on a corner a hundred yards away from the Red Roof Hotel. Now a light blue Lexus pulled up, the window down.

‘Excuse me, please?’

Bambitou had to look twice. At first he thought that a kid was driving, then he registered the bald head and the thick glasses. He stepped closer and lowered his head. ‘Yeah?’

‘Are you heading to the Genetics Department, Bambi?’

It was a shock. Not the strange little man, not the very slow and menacing accent, but that someone was calling him ‘Bambi’, a name that his mother had not used since he was five years old.

The man added. ‘If you are, come inside the vehicle.’

Bambitou shook his head, checking the street quickly before climbing into the rear. The car pulled slowly around the next corner before stopping outside a McDonalds. As Bambitou glanced at the diners the opposite door opened, a fit looking man sliding in.

The newcomer stared at Bambitou as the Lexus pulled off, cutting up another vehicle and earning some loud horn anger. Bambitou turned his head and peered out of the rear window at the irate driver of the vehicle behind. He faced

the second man, who seemed unfazed. Pointing a large black finger at Mole he asked. 'Can he drive?'

'Not very well,' came the calm reply.

'What is ... he?' Bambitou asked, nodding at Mole.

'Top agent, deadly killer,' Mr. Grey announced with neutral features.

Bambitou's eyebrows shot up. He studied the back of Mole's head as Herr Mole struggled to see where he was going. 'Who are you people?' he softly enquired.

'We work for the people down the phone,' Mr. Grey informed him in level tones.

Bambitou's eyes widened. 'You're British Secret Service? You're a New Yorker and he ... he's from outer space!'

Mole glanced at him in the rear view mirror then swerved to avoid a parked car.

'Jesus!' Bambitou cursed at the back of Mole's head, gripping the seat in front of him. 'Is this your way of frightening me or something?'

'No, Bambi,' Mr. Grey stated, his features cold.

'And stop calling me that, fuckers!'

'As you wish,' Grey responded.

'And where we going?'

'To the university genetics department,' Mole stated in his slow, oddly threatening accent. 'You must give them the good news and the bad news.'

'Bad news is their gene therapy drugs are tainted,' Bambitou suggested. 'Good news is ... they get \$5million?' Grey nodded. 'Are you going to tell me what this is all about?' Bambitou ventured as they turned onto Highway 80.

'Not really,' Grey offered. 'Can't.'

'So I just have to trust you?'

'Not entirely.'

Bambitou's K2 phone chirped. He faced Grey, a sarcastic look. 'Should I get that?' Grey nodded. Bambitou took out the phone, pressed green and held it to his ear. 'Yeah?'

'Special Agent Bambitou?'

'Yes. Who's this?'

'This is Sir Morris Beesely.'

'The real one? Not the fakey little actor?'

'The real one.'

'And you're British Secret Service?'

'No.'

'No?'

'No, the woman sitting next to me is British Secret Service. I run an organization in Switzerland.'

'So that's what these six shifts were up to? Something to do with you?' Bambitou enquired.

'Trying to kill me for the most part, trying to cover their tracks also.'

'So there was no bank robbery attempt?'

'No. Part of your CIA kindly sent a hundred mercenaries after me.'

'And you lived to tell the tale?'

'The British Government sent four plane loads of SAS troopers across, and your kind government sent a squadron of Apache assault helicopters to assist. All but one of the mercenaries died. And that one we deliberately let go.'

'That never made the papers!' Bambitou pointed out.

'Thankfully, no.'

'So what you after from me?'

'You seem to have come across this by accident, our ... little problem. But you could be useful to us.'

'Useful how? I ain't spying for no foreign power!' Bambitou insisted.

'Yes, you will.'

‘You seem very sure of yourself. If you’ve read my file you’ll see I can’t be bought, or threatened. Not even by the demented midget’s driving!’

‘We have no intention of threatening you, Special Agent Bambitou. There are two reasons why you will assist me in stopping the CIA splinter group from doing what it is planning on doing.’

‘Yeah, what are they?’

‘First, you lost several members of your family to Sickie Cell Anemia related illnesses. And second, those gene-therapy batches were not tainted by white supremacists. They were carefully engineered over thirty years, at a cost of hundreds of millions of US tax payer’s dollars.’

Bambitou threw down the phone. ‘Stop the car!’ he roared.

Mole pulled up. Bambitou shoved himself out before the car had fully stopped and made a few steps before halting. He turned to a dumpster and kicked a large dent into it, smashing a huge claw of a fist down onto its plastic top and breaking it. The dumpster took the beating of its life. A young man came out of the back of a shop, observing the scene before hurrying back inside.

Finally, Bambitou slumped against a wall, crying. Grey and Mole waited, each with their own thoughts.

When the young man finally peered outside the big black man was gone, so was the car. The dumpster was a wreck.

2

They halted outside the Genetics department. Bambitou’s FBI badge had gained them access the campus with no problem. Now they waited.

‘Will this attract the attention of the CIA shifts?’ Bambitou asked. He only turned to face Grey when he had finished.

‘Yes.’

‘And they’ll come after me?’

‘Hopefully. You wish to pull out?’

‘No, I want to look them in eye. But there’s only one and a half of *you*.’

Grey raised an eyebrow. ‘There are more assets close by.’

‘Got something for me, more than a .38 revolver?’

‘In the trunk.’

Bambitou nodded. He opened the car door and headed for the genetics department.

* * *

‘What’s this place?’ Bambitou asked an hour later as they bumped along an isolated dirt track, a half-mile from the highway.

‘This is the holiday home we booked with your credit card number an hour ago,’ Mr. Grey explained.

The Lexus halted and parked up. After a small roll backwards Herr Mole got the handbrake. They all clambered out.

Two men appeared in the doorway covered in camouflage netting, sporting green-painted sniper rifles, nothing that Bambitou had ever seen before. Mr. Grey offered the two walking bushes a flurry of hand signals that Bambitou could not follow. The two men ran across the gravel track and into a field, ducking behind a hedgerow.

The boot noisily opening caused Bambitou to turn. He stepped to the rear. The little guy was strapping on a

bullet-proof vest and a black helmet that seemed way too big for him.

‘Now he looks like fucking Darth Vader!’ Bambitou dryly pointed out.

Mole grabbed an M4 and a spare magazine, walking purposefully to the rear of the house. Mr. Grey took a harness full of equipment and slipped into it.

‘There’s stuff on there I’ve never seen,’ Bambitou remarked, not expecting too much of a response.

‘And you should hope you never do again.’ Grey threw on a large camouflage costume and was instantly transformed. Finally he pulled two camouflaged soft-boots over his shoes. He lifted out a green-painted Colt-Commando with night sights and silencer before slamming the boot.

‘What about me?’ Bambitou asked. ‘My weapon?’

‘Inside the house. But don’t be seen holding it, you’ll scare off the visitors. Put the lights on when dark, show your face.’

‘So I’m the bait?’

The walking bush moved quickly off into a small cluster of trees, gone in an instant.

Alone now, Bambitou turned and looked back down the dirt track, figuring it would be dark in an hour. ‘What the fuck am I doing here?’ he whispered to himself. He sighed heavily, turning and walking to the house. Inside he found an M-16 on the table. He released the magazine and checked it, loaded and cocked the rifle, setting safety on.

The fridge was fully stocked by the helpful rental agency, a gift basket of fruit on the table. His mouth felt dry and he opened a soda, settling in front of the TV. As an afterthought he turned his chair towards the dirt track, within reach of the M-16. And waited.

Dusk came down, followed by night. Now he sat in the light, and anyone could walk up to the house and shoot at

him through the windows, he considered. The stress was building; his trust had been placed firmly in the strange little man and the walking bush.

The door opened and he grabbed the M-16.

‘Cool it, Bambi!’ Mr. Grey encouraged, moving out of line of shot. Bambitou’s heart was pounding. ‘Come out and help us move the bodies.’

Bambitou plodded heavily towards the open door, M16 ready. Outside he took a moment to let his eyes adjust to the dark. A man lay just five yards from the door, obviously dead, the man’s weapon lying next to him. Another lay ten yards away and he could see two black blobs dragging other bodies along the track.

‘Are they dead?’ Bambitou whispered as he stepped forwards.

‘Yeah, quite dead. Take that one to the ditch over there.’

Bambitou slung his weapon. ‘I didn’t hear a thing!’

‘Then we earned our keep this night,’ Mr. Grey said flatly.

Bambitou dragged the man to the indicated ditch and tossed him in before returning to the house, finding ‘Darth Vader’ inside.

The little man took off his helmet. ‘You can close your eyes for two hours. I will watch you,’ he told Bambitou.

‘What happened?’

‘A four-man team came to kill you. We killed them.’

‘Are they going to be missed?’

‘We are counting on it,’ Mole indicated in threatening tones.

‘Who were they?’

‘Irregulars, freelance mercenaries in the service of your CIA. Your weapon, Mister Bambitou.’ Mole pointed.

‘What?’

‘Do not sleep with it, you may wake up and shoot.’

Bambitou put down the M-16 and sat, finishing the flat soda.

‘Would you like some tea or coffee?’ the little man offered in his strange accent.

‘Yeah, please. Saw some doughnuts in there, too.’

Herr Mole made tea for them both.

* * *

Gunfire woke Bambitou three hours later. He jumped up, then immediately got back down, grabbing the M-16. Breathing hard he looked for the light switch as a burst came through the window, showering him with glass.

He crawled on all fours across the glass, dragging the M-16. At the door he could see the light switch, just inside the door. It would mean standing up to reach it.

Footsteps. Whispers.

The windows were gone, the net curtains blowing in the breeze, the cool night air registering on the sweat of his face. He made ready the M-16, fumbling to knock off the setting for safety. Back against the solid fridge he sat and waited.

A face at the window. He fired a shot burst. A burst came back, but too high, the ceiling fan now off kilter and squeaking.

Another burst was followed by a man crashing through the door. Bambitou raised the M-16 but the man just fell forwards, covered in blood, his earpiece radio falling out. Blood flowed quickly across the polished lino floor.

He focused his aim on the door, his breathing laboured, his eyes wide. A shot rang out, puncturing the fridge door, something inside hissing.

He rolled away, behind the sofa, and took up a lying stance, covering the front door but with a view of the back door, masked from the window by the sofa. A quiet crack

and the light bulb blew. Total darkness. That had been a silenced shot, he considered, one of the home team.

He licked his dry lips and focused on the doorway. Footsteps, crunching gravel, a shape. Who was it? The fit man? Darth Vader's younger brother?

A darkened head now peeked in. The home team knew where he was, *they* would not have to look. He aimed and fired. The shape screamed for a few seconds. Then silence. He waited.

A helicopter. Rescue? Reinforcements? More of the opposition? Helicopter getting closer, louder. A strange sound, getting louder. The helicopter hit the dirt track, a rotor blade slicing through the house, an almighty bang. Debris rained down on him.

Bambitou finally lifted his head, noting a large rectangular hole through the wall, lit by the dull moonlight. 'Christ!' The helicopter, whoever it belonged to, had crashed. A sudden orange glow illuminated the front of the house as bright as daylight. He could now see a man crawling along, rifle in hand. The man suddenly turned over, now lying still.

Ours look like bushes, he told himself. Not one of ours, be positive. He aimed through the doorway, his heart pounding in his ears, his breathing erratic.

A car, headlights, a loud, long burst of automatic fire. No more car sounds. Another long burst, impacts of bullets on metal, a scream.

A hand on his neck, pinning him down. He froze.

'OK, Bambi?' The hand came away, now lifting him up. A bush stood next to him, the voice was the man from the car.

'Fuck, you scared me!' Bambitou whispered. 'What's happening?'

The bush responded, 'Most dead, one wounded. C'mon, say hello.'

The bush took him by the arm and out of the front door, leading him to a body brightly illuminated by the burning helicopter, the man's mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water, his eyes moving.

A burst of fire from the rear of the house caused the bush to disappear before Bambitou knew he had gone. He focused on the wounded man, who was now trying to reach for his weapon.

Bambitou aimed before stopping himself. He was FBI and this was wrong; his oath, his duty. He should be giving this man - this *prisoner* - first aid and arresting him.

Another burst erupted from the rear of the house. Startled, Bambitou accidentally nudged the trigger, shooting the potential prisoner three times in the head.

'Shit! Sorry!' He crouched and checked the area, breathing hard.

Mr. Grey stepped towards the attacker that Herr Mole had just shot, assault rifle prone, eyes darting every which way. Herr Mole remained in his little foxhole at the rear of the house. Finally Grey stopped next to the man, kneeling at his head. The man spat out blood and rasped.

'You made a fatal mistake, my friend,' Grey whispered. The man tried to raise his head, to get a final image of the camouflaged sniper kneeling over him. Mr. Grey poked a finger into the insolent eye. It closed. He felt the man's collar, his jacket fabric and then the man's shirt. Grey added, 'When trying to shoot Mole, wear camouflage!' He stood, placing his foot on the man's neck.

A slight vibration in his pocket indicated a text message on his private cell phone. Puzzled and curious, he opened the flip phone and touched a key; Stanton's old mobile number displayed. He pressed 'OPEN' and read the message in blue light.

ARE YOU REALLY SURE THAT YOU DON'T WANT A PUPPY?

He smiled inwardly, lifted his foot off the man's neck and humanely put a bullet through the man's ear.

* * *

Ten miles away Mossad had chosen to adopt a typically Israeli 'subtle' approach to their task. They waited a half-mile from the isolated holiday home, just three miles from the edges of suburban Jackson. Now they observed it through night sights.

Five men could be seen crawling along, slowly getting closer to the target house. The first bright green blob, as viewed through the night sights, was now only a few yards from the back door to the bungalow. The Mossad agent glanced at his colleagues, shrugged, then pressed the button on a remote detonator.

Three miles away the residents of suburban Jackson opened their mesh doors and listened. The explosion had sounded close. The blaze in the shell of the bungalow blinded the Mossad night sights. They scanned the area for a minute, shrugged, then packed up their equipment.

The approach of the MI6 assets was wholly different in style and execution. Their five *guests* were already inside the house, puzzling over the large amount of cash on the table and not knowing the bills were seized forgeries. The cocaine under bed was, however, quite real. So were the six pipe bombs.

Sirens punctured the night as the ATF task force moved quickly along the small access road to the holiday home from both directions. A river prevented easy escape to the east, an open field to the west offering no cover.

A minute later the house was surrounded, the British assets packing away their equipment.

Epilogue

1

Mosh walked into a padded room at the ‘Children of the Holocaust’ hospice in a Tel Aviv suburb. On the padded floor lay a man with bandages over his hands and feet, a patch on his eye.

Registering a presence, the man looked up with his good eye. ‘Where am I?’ he got out in a raw whisper, his mouth dry.

Mosh squatted close to the man. ‘You are in Tel Aviv, my friend. In a mental asylum.’

The man’s one good eye flashed and widened. He tried to get up, that chosen action hindered by a lack of fingers and toes. He winched at the pain from trying to use his hands. ‘What happened?’ he coughed out, glancing around the room.

‘You took on K2, my friend. That’s what happened.’

‘K2? Beesely?’

Talking softly, Mosh answered, ‘Yes, my friend. He cut your fingers and toes off, took away your eye and ... a few other body parts, Mr. Kirkpatrick.’

Kirkpatrick raised the bandaged stubs, now realising that he could not wiggle his fingers.

Mosh added, ‘Not to worry, our people will be make sure you are fed and looked after. Your bills have been paid for the next forty years, which includes twenty-four hour suicide watch.’ He stood. ‘I guess the idea is for you to think about what you did, Mr. Kirkpatrick.’

Mosh closed the padded door on the screams then glanced into the next cell at the man huddled into the corner. Rudenson lifted his good eye for a moment then went back to his own thoughts.

* * *

Otto and Beesely had been firmly told, by Johnno, to be at the drawbridge at exactly twelve noon. Now they walked out with a handful of guards and most of the managers. Several tables had been laid out, equipment spread around and several groups of guards sat listening to lectures or taking part in practical equipment tests.

Johnno walked over to Beesely and Otto, Thomas trailing behind. 'OK, white collar workers, pay attention.' He led the way to the first table. 'Here were have Big Dave, crazy person number one, sleeping rough on London streets two weeks ago.' He put a finger to his lips and gestured Beesely closer.

They listened as 'Big Dave' gave a lecture on disarming combination motion sensors on car bombs to a group of twelve guards. Each guard held a mock device with actual motion sensors, several giving off a quiet 'bleep' when moved too sharply.

Beesely and Otto listened for five minutes, intrigued, then followed Johnno to the next table. 'Mickey' was giving a lecture on silent and efficient killing techniques, plus improvised weapons.

'Nasty,' Beesely whispered to Johnno as Mickey simulated slicing a guard's throat with a weapon improvised from a coke can. They moved on.

Next came a group around a car. 'Skinny Pete' held a stopwatch and was timing guards as they ran across, slid under the car and tampered with it.

'That's it?' Beesely asked after a guard spent less than two seconds under a car. 'What did he do?'

‘You wouldn’t want to drive that car after,’ Johno commented with a wry smile.

They moved on. A long trestle table had been covered with household items, now rapidly being turned into improvised bombs as John McAvoy, know as Big Mac, stood cracking jokes. He threw something he had just cobbled together ten yards to the nearby trees, a boom echoing around a second later.

‘Keep *him* out of our bleeding kitchens!’ Beesely whispered. ‘Enough trouble there!’

Johno laughed then faced the training groups. ‘All instructors!’ he bellowed. ‘On me!’ The four instructors jogged over and lined up.

‘Gentlemen,’ Johno called. ‘This is Sir Morris Beesely and Otto.’

Beesely shook the hand of the first man. ‘What’s your background?’

‘Paras, then SAS for two years. Broke my leg badly, so had to quit, then bomb disposal, sir.’

Beesely nodded. ‘What are you teaching?’

‘General to advanced bomb disposal, twelve lectures, six written tests for the guys and two dozen practical tests, sir.’

‘Sounds thorough,’ Beesely commended. ‘Good.’ He shook hands with the next man.

‘Big Mac, sir. I make up bombs so that *he* has to defuse them.’ They laughed. ‘Johno has asked me to put together a programme so that some of your guys can sneak into a place and blow it up without using anything they brought with them.’

‘Oh, excellent,’ Beesely enthused, turning to Otto. ‘No evidence left behind.’ Otto nodded his approval. Beesely faced the next man. ‘And you were teaching silent killing.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘So,’ Beesely began, ‘our guys can sneak in, kill the occupants quietly with household items and then blow the place from their kitchen leftovers.’

He shook the hand of the last man. ‘Well done. And welcome to K2.’

‘An honour, sir,’ Big Mac offered.

‘To your duties!’ Johnno ordered. The men walked back as Johnno waved in the managers, a half-circle forming around him. ‘These guys were on the scrap heap a few weeks ago. Now they’re back on their feet and teaching. And the important thing for us is this – they’re keen to work, love us to bits for rescuing them off the streets and hostels in the UK, and quite literally ready to fight and die for us.’

‘An excellent recruiting ground,’ Beesely enthused. ‘Motivation is everything, and these guys had nothing. Good work Johnno, very good work.’

Beesely turned to Otto. ‘Let’s keep the recruitment and selection process going.’

Otto suggested, ‘We should start with a hostel or camp in the UK, first level selection and clean-up, plus an assessment of skills. Then second stage nearby, third stage here.’

Beesely glanced at Johnno, a question.

Johnno cocked a teasing eyebrow at Otto. ‘Sounds very practical. You’re not ... Swiss ... are you?’

The managers laughed.

* * *

Otto glanced around the pastry shop. He had heard about it, but had not visited till now. The guards remained outside as Otto, Johnno, Beesely and Thomas sat, the only occupants.

‘Usual, love,’ Johno loudly called. Then he faced Beesely, exchanging a quick look when Otto faced away from them. ‘You’re not allowed sweet stuff, are you?’

‘No,’ Beesely agreed, Otto turning back.

‘Not to worry, they’ve made some of the Napoleon Bavarian with no sugar and just the ingredients that we checked with the doctors. Probably tastes like crap.’

A minute later the supposedly modified cake was placed down, a medium slice for Beesely. He tried it. ‘Not bad,’ he enthused.

Otto tried some as well. ‘Yes, good for artificial sweetener.’

‘So,’ Johno began, addressing Otto, ‘you bring your woman anywhere around here?’

‘No. We live on the edge of Zurich, so always to be in the city for restaurants and cafes. We have friends in the city, not related to the bank –’

‘Just as well,’ Johno remarked. ‘All talking bank bollocks over the meal.’

Otto held his gaze on Johno for a second. ‘Yes. And since she has become pregnant we have developed friendships with many ... couples, and other pregnant women.’

Johno tried to hide an amused grin. ‘So ... doing lots of ... couple stuff, eh? Furniture, decorating, schools and kindergarten...?’

Beesely glanced at Johno then waited for Otto’s response.

Otto gave it plenty of thought, his head lowered, sampling Thomas’ cake. ‘I would not have believed it possible to talk for three hours about a choice between just three kindergarten.’

‘Well,’ Johno began, ‘she’s probably trying to be ... very thorough. You know, Swiss culture an’ all.’

‘She is French,’ Otto pointedly reminded Johnno, a quick glare.

‘Yeah, but you’ve rubbed off on her – all your good habits.’

Otto’s eyes narrowed, focusing on Johnno, not quite understanding the sarcasm.

Johnno continued, ‘Does she wake you up in the night and send you to the kitchen for strange sandwiches?’

‘No,’ Otto firmly replied, a glum look. ‘She sends me into the city, to the all night burger bars.’

‘Can’t you ... order in?’ Johnno ventured, a sly grin.

‘Where possible I send guards out,’ he admitted. ‘They are looking forwards to the baby being born.’

Beesely smiled to himself, noticed by Otto.

‘Why not live in the castle?’ Thomas loudly asked.

‘Be plenty of baby sitters!’ Johnno suggested.

Otto took a bite. ‘I’ll take a year off and leave you two trouble makers to run things.’

Beesely smiled. ‘I wish I could honestly say that everything will be fine, and that you’ll be a great father. But since I have *zero* experience of that particular subject matter, best I not try and offer any kind of advice. My policy has always been to take the kids back into the house after they are forty years old. And then *house trained!*’

‘House ... trained?’ Johnno queried, a slight frown.

‘Something Otto told me he was during the first week here,’ Beesely explained. ‘Slight error in translation.’

‘What is it?’ Thomas asked, his lips covered in chocolate.

‘House trained,’ Johnno repeated. ‘When you teach a young dog, a puppy, to go to toilet in the garden or the small tray, and not on the floor in the house.’

‘Are we getting a puppy?’ Thomas excitedly asked.

‘No!’ three adults said at the same time.

Thomas cursed under his breath in German.

When Otto went to the toilet Beesely quietly asked, 'That cake –'

'The full monty,' Johno cut in with. 'Nothing artificial.'

'Thought so. Have some delivered, labelled up as *Beesely only, medicinal use!*'

* * *

The off-duty guards and agents had been warned not to enter the school cafeteria until Johno had arrived. Now he walked in with Thomas in tow, through quite a crowd gathered in the school playground on this pleasant evening. With the doors flung open the guards, agents, parents - and a selected group of children - wandered in to see whatever the big surprise was.

The aroma hit them first; the very fragrant, and very pleasant aroma of cooked food. They had all figured it was a meal, since they had been warned to have no lunch or evening meal. Now, at 7pm, the 'big surprise' was about to be revealed.

Johno walked to the centre of the school canteen and stood on a chair, waving the group forwards. 'OK. Listen up! You Swiss make some nice food, but your evening meals lack something that us British have in abundance. Bloody foreigners!'

He gestured to the beginning of the food selections, numerous chefs and cooks stood ready to assist. 'Each of you take a plate, go around the room in sequence, but listen carefully.' He wagged a finger. 'Only take a small sample of each dish, reading the label and seeing what it is. The trick here is to sample everything, not to fill-up on just one thing. OK, ladies and gentlemen, help yourselves.'

Like polite Swiss employees they formed a neat queue and started placing small samples onto their plates. Thomas, however, went straight for his favourite and grabbed a big plateful.

Five minutes later Johnno was advising one of Thomas' teachers, married to a guard, how best to eat popadoms, loading it up with different flavours from the chutney tray. She and her husband were pleasantly shocked by the taste effect.

Arranged around the room were, in sequence; Indian, Thai, Bengali, Sri Lankan, South African, New Orleans Cajun, Chinese, Cantonese and Burmese dishes, the chefs flown in special from around Europe, some resident in Switzerland.

The children were loving it, never having tried the majority of dishes and going back for more several times. Thomas' favourite was the Indian chicken Tikka and Chinese skewered lamb – covered in what he described as 'the green stuff'. Fortunately, the chef's had made enough for a small army. More guards turned up with wives and girlfriends in tow, being briefed on what to do by their colleagues.

After thirty minutes water was rapidly running out and more being ordered, tissues dispensed as people tackled the very tasty, yet very hot dishes.

Johnno wandered around the room, greeting guards and wives and asking them which dishes they preferred. The head teacher put in an appearance, seeing what Johnno was doing to his school cafeteria before getting firmly nudged towards the spicy offerings, spending the next hour sampling dishes and chatting to parents. It was just as well he partook, since Johnno told him he was going to run the event every month.

The ex-SAS crew put in an appearance an hour later, a large number of the Swiss wives wishing to retreat in the

face of moistened hairlines. The chefs re-loaded the selections and the British boys tucked in. Sitting next to Johnno and Thomas, Mavo and Kev plonked down.

‘This is more like it,’ Kev implored. ‘Good bit a wee Indian and Chinese.’

‘Stay away from the Burmese spicy meatballs,’ Johnno suggested.

‘Wee bit hot?’ Kev asked.

‘Tasty as hell,’ Johnno explained. ‘But the after-shock hits you with a kick.’

‘We won the war yet, Boss?’ Mavo asked as he tucked in.

‘Yeah,’ Johnno confidently replied. ‘We killed most of the main players. The twat behind it all is in a mental asylum, his chestnuts getting roasted every day. Be a bit quieter now. How’s the shoulder?’

‘Fine, fine.’ Kev tucked in.

Thomas offered Kev a strange dish on a clean fork. Kev tried it, nodding his approval.

‘Goat testicles,’ Thomas explained.

As Mavo roared with laughter Kev spat into his hand.

‘It’s not,’ Johnno explained, laughing as Thomas ran off.

‘Wee little bastard,’ Kev cursed. ‘Takes after yee.’

‘That he does,’ Johnno said with a contented look. ‘That he does.’

* * *

Wearing his ceremonial Masonic robes, Guido Pepi addressed the gathering at this Strasbourg Masonic Lodge. Present this evening were the Top Table, plus the First Tier of twenty-four senior ‘brothers’, all Masters of their individual geographical lodges.

‘Brothers.’ He waited for them to settle. ‘I stand before you now, humbled, to report upon the subject of K2 in Switzerland and, in part, our continued search for *the list*.’

A dull, reverberating sound filled the hall as members gently banged their fists on the old wooden tables, a sign of displeasure with the mention of K2 and the list.

Pepi waited. ‘Brothers, it is now certain that the Americans have made good use of K2 – its people and its structures - for their own dirty work. There appears to have been an internal struggle within the CIA and other American agencies, K2 being used in this proxy war, both in Europe and the United States.’

Another rumbling of fist banging echoed around the room, louder this time.

Pepi waited for it to subside before continuing. ‘The influence of these Americans upon K2 is obviously a concern, but we can also report that these Americans - and the new ... *occupiers* of K2 – have shown no interest *whatsoever* in the treasure or the list.’

Now knuckles tapped the table top instead of the sides of firsts, a sign of approval.

‘There have been no excavations at the castle or elsewhere, no interest shown, no enquiries made, no historical documents examined. I believe, gentlemen, that we can congratulate our organisation on doing a good job of suppressing the existence of the files and the list.’

Loud wrapping of knuckles echoed around the large hall, Pepi taking a moment for a sip of water. From high above, in a corner alcove, a camera watched the events, relayed back to the basement of Pepi’s Tivoli villa. Seven elderly men sat watching the screens, dutifully waited upon by Pepi’s daughter, Maria.

Pepi continued, ‘We have begun plans to ... finally finish-off K2, and their new American friends. The longer that this association continues with the Americans, the

more likely it will be that the Americans learn of the list... or turn their attentions towards us. Those plans will be risky and costly to this group, but we have little choice.'

A mixture of fist banging and knuckle wrapping echoed around the hall, stewards carefully noting who was doing what.

Pepi added, 'We must dislodge the American and British interest from Switzerland.' In recess, Pepi took a call in his private chambers at the rear of the hall. 'Sir?'

'Douvelle, the Paris Master, arrange for his health to suffer. He continues to oppose you. Consider Schell from Vienna as a replacement.'

'Yes, sir.'

* * *

The next day Otto and Johno were laughing so loud in Beesely's office that managers were lifting up onto tip-toes and trying to get a peek into Beesely's office from the command centre.

Johno grabbed another beer from the fridge, and one for Otto. Both cans were opened simultaneously, deliberately spraying each other. They clicked cans and sipped, re-reading the report in their hands, now soiled with beer. Beesely wheeled in Dame Helen, followed closely by Susan and Patrick.

'Get yourselves a drink,' Johno buoyantly implored.

Otto rushed to his feet and stumbled, running a concerned hand down his tie, but unable to remove the smirk.

'Otto!' Beesely softly chided. 'I am surprised at you!'

'What's the celebration?' Dame Helen asked, puzzled by their antics, but amused.

Johno waved around the report. 'Not celebrating, not funny really. Well, little bit.' He laughed, followed by Otto trying hard to suppress his grin, both wiping the tears.

'OK, what's the joke?' Susan asked, hands on hips.

Johno took a breath and tried to compose himself. 'The Canadian, the one we thought was part of the CIA team.' Otto shook his head, looking at his feet. 'Turns out he had nothing to do with it.'

'Oh hell,' Dame Helen quietly let out, clearly concerned for the man.

Johno continued, 'We signed him up to those porn sites.'

'My God,' Susan exclaimed in a strong whisper. 'Did he get arrested?'

'Yes,' Otto said with a smirk. 'And bailed.'

'And why, pray tell, is that so funny?' Beesely pointedly enquired.

'He also got half a million dollars in his account,' Johno pointed out with a huge grin.

'Was he happy with the money?' Patrick asked, glancing from Johno to Otto for any clues of explanation.

Otto laughed, quickly putting his hand to his mouth.

Johno added, 'His wife ... emptied the account and ran off with his solicitor!'

Patrick laughed. Susan stood shaking her head, still perplexed.

'There is more,' Otto strained to get out.

Johno added, 'The American's accidentally named him and ... and listed him as a hero undercover CIA agent – using the list we sent them - making this guy a celebrity overnight. He sold his story to the newspapers in Canada!'

'What story?' Dame Helen asked. 'If he wasn't one of them?'

Otto and Johno crumpled together.

‘He made it up, sold it, got two million dollars!’ Johnno laughed. ‘It’s a great story.’ He lifted a newspaper and shoved it towards Helen.

‘We should recruit this man,’ Otto suggested, wagging his finger. ‘What he can do is remarkable! And I never knew that Berlin was the capital of Switzerland. Or that we all speak ‘Swiss’, something this man is very fluent in!’

Beesely shook his head, a slight grin.

‘That’s not all,’ Johnno strained to get out. ‘Not the best bit.’

Otto explained, a knowing look exchanged with Beesely, ‘He was visiting Germany, Bavaria, to help his uncle, who had a ... *bookstore*. Seems that some *vanker* burnt the bookstore down!’

Beesely straightened, suddenly concerned, glancing at Susan and Patrick under his eyebrows. Dame Helen sat shaking her head, a scowl for Beesely.

Patrick and Susan glanced at each other. ‘What?’

Beesely caught Johnno’s attention, sticking out his chin and raising his eyebrows in a question. ‘Did you not promise to pick a certain *someone* up at the airport?’

‘Oh shit!’ Johnno jumped up and wobbled, hurrying out.

* * *

An hour later Beesely eased up from his chair as the American Ambassador and the President’s ‘special envoy’ were shown into his office. Otto bowed his head and greeted them, very Swiss-like, shaking hands then introducing Beesely. Johnno slowly, and reluctantly, stood, Alison easing up off the cabinet after an encouraging head-tip from Johnno.

‘Sir Morris Beesely. I have heard a great deal about you,’ the Ambassador said as they shook hands. How much he knew was, as yet, unknown.

‘Welcome to Schloss Diane ... and to K2, Mister Ambassador.’ Beesely turned, gesturing towards Johnno. ‘And this is Johnno.’

The Ambassador shook Johnno’s hand. ‘And I’ve heard even more about you.’ It was said with a slight furrow of the Ambassador’s brow and a quizzical stare. Johnno simply shook the man’s hand and made a ‘welcome’ face.

Then the Ambassador turned to Alison, thinking her perhaps part of the team. He stopped dead, his eyes widening. ‘Alison Star?’ He smiled then quickly hid it.

She put her hands on her hips. ‘And how would you know that?’ she sternly, yet playfully asked.

‘Yeah,’ Johnno repeated. ‘How would *you* know who she is? President a fan?’

All eyes now fixed on the Ambassador.

His cheeks reddened. ‘Er ...’

Donations: if you are following the series, and enjoying them, then kindly donate a dollar via PayPal (to gwresearch@aol.com). It helps to keep the writer writing, to produce more for you to read.

Nazi Gold

K2 Book 4

Geoff Wolak

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Format

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Contact

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This book is dedicated to my young niece ***Hannah***, who asked, and who is banned from reading it for at least ten years after 2007.

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About the series of books

K2 is a series of 6 books. If you have picked up book two, three, four or more - without reading book one - then please put it back down; the story will not make much sense without reading the books in series. They all follow-on closely and previous plots are not re-capped. Later books build on earlier events/characters.

This is a work of fiction, but based on real, current and historic scenarios. All characters are fictitious.

No garden moles were harmed during the writing/research of these books. The author does not advocate firearms as a suitable control of garden pests!

There are many 'facts' deliberately hidden in the book, made light of. 'Many a true word spoken in jest.'

Author's note

'It's largely based in fact. It is written as action-fantasy-fiction, since real life spying is way too boring for a novel.'

Inheritance
Assault
Revenge
Nazi Gold
Endurance
Crucifix

Glossary of abbreviations

P-26/P-27 - Swiss secret sleeper armies
UNA - Swiss Military Intelligence
MI6 - British Intelligence, aka, SIS - Secret Intelligence Service, for overseas operations (non-domestic), aka, 'Circus'.
MI5 - British Intelligence (domestic)
CIA - Central Intelligence Agency, USA, overseas intelligence service
SAS - Special Air Service, British Special Forces (similar to US Green Berets/Delta Force)
SBS - Special Boat Squadron, British, similar to US Navy Seals
DOD - Department of Defense - USA
MOD - Ministry of Defence - UK
NSA - National Security Agency, USA, aka 'No such agency'.
Reported to intercept 'all' the world's text messages and emails.
SOE - Special Operations Executive, British WWII covert operations
OSS - USA, like SOE, WWII, overseas
DGSE - French Secret Service/counter terrorism - domestic and foreign
IRA - Irish Republican Army, terrorist movement
ETA - Spanish/Basque separatist/terrorist movement
Red Brigade - Italian communist/terrorist/crime gang
KGB - Soviet Intelligence, prior to 1990s.
NAAFI - Navy Army Air Force Institute - shops on British military bases.
SIB - British Military Police
BKA - Federal German Police, similar to FBI
FSB - Russian Intelligence, formerly KGB
Special Branch - British Police - anti-terrorism/organized crime
Wehrmacht - general term, German armed services WWII
COBRA - Cabinet Office Briefing Room 'A', used by British Prime Minister for meetings with security staff.
FARC - Colombian guerrillas/communist

British military slang

Oppo - opposite number/close working buddy

Pongo - soldier - derisive

Ponce/poncey - upper class/educated/effeminate - derisive

Regiment - he was 'Regiment' - he was SAS

Rock Apes - RAF Regiment - defensive unit of airfields

Rupert - officer/upper-class - derisive

Beast - punish soldier

Stripy - Air Force Officer, derisive term for ranking stripes

Billets - accommodation/food

Civvy - civilian

Badged - qualified entry to SAS, receipt of cap badge

Best bib and tucker - best suit/outfit/military dinner suit

QT - on the QT, on the quiet

Stag – on guard duty

England. The hunt.

The K2 agents waited, keenly observing a monitor relaying images from a camera with a telescopic lens. Movement; they pointed at it in silence. Death was their game, the thrill of the hunt an added bonus.

The first agent checked the wire connections attached to his trigger mechanism as an English explosives expert observed from the rear. The instructor had performed his educational tasks; the exact amount of explosives, shaped in the correct pattern for the job in hand. He waited patiently, keen to see that his Swiss pupils were making good progress in their studies. The Master Arm switch was thrown, making the circuit live, unknown to their intended victim.

Movement. They glanced at each other in silent anticipation, the tension growing second by second as they focussed on the triggerman, his hand hovering over the button. He checked their nervous faces once more then threw the switch.

A dull thud could be heard. They ran outside and across the grass, a cheer going up. A few feet from the smoking hole lay a dead mole on Beesely's lawn. They congratulated each other. Then it began moving.

‘It's alive!’ one gasped.

Pistols came out in a hurry, a burst of fire, thirty rounds at close range into their hated enemy.

The English bomb-maker walked up, eyes wide, shaking his head. ‘Do you think it's dead now, you bunch of stir crazy fuckers!’

Nazi treasure

1

Otto walked briskly into Beesely's office at 11am. Thomas was sat crossed-legged on the floor and struggling with a FN GPMG, a hefty 7.62mm belt-fed machine gun with a bi-pod. He was trying to re-assemble it without any help from 'vanker', to show Grandpa Beesely how clever he was. Johnno lifted his head from where he sat overlooking Thomas, tea mug in hand.

'Something interesting,' Otto stated. He stood at the side of the desk looking as if he had something interesting to say.

Beesely looked up from his file, lifting his eyebrows in question.

Otto continued, 'We have been approached by an old man from a small village called Bily Potok in the Czech Republic. It is near the town of Liebere, 65km north east of Prague. He says that he knows of an old Nazi tunnel complex ... where gold is hidden.'

Johnno straightened. 'Nazi gold?'

Beesely smiled widely. 'A treasure hunt,' he enthused. 'Excellent. I've always wanted to search for Nazi gold.'

Thomas jumped up. 'Can I have a bar?' he begged in his accented English.

'His English is getting better,' Beesely noted.

'They all study it in school, he's been studying it for years,' Johnno informed Beesely as they both studied the lad. 'He can read and understand a lot, just has some difficulty with pronouncing the odd word. I make him explain what he wants in English - motivated self-interest

training technique. If he wants a treat then it's got to be in English *and* correct.'

'Seems to be working,' Beesely agreed, smiling at twelve-year-old Thomas.

Otto stepped to the corridor and waved someone forwards. A manager walked in with a rolled map, followed by a slow moving and hunched old man escorted by a guard. The manager un-rolled the map and weighted down the edges with cups as everyone keenly moved in for a closer look.

The old man, dressed in a black leather coat and matching black leather cap, smiled and waved as he sat down, being ignored as everyone focused on the map. The manager pointed out the village of Bily Potok, highlighting the hills and forest to the south of it.

'It's on the edge of the old German speaking part of the Czech Republic, the Sudetenland,' Beesely noted, studying the topography with a finger.

'There's a railway line not far,' Johnno pointed out.

'Ah, so there used to be a rail link to the area,' Beesely considered without looking up. 'Germans always moved things by rail, heavy stuff anyway.'

The manager pointed out the area of interest.

'Isolated enough,' Johnno quietly suggested to no one in particular. 'Only the one access road.' He glanced up at Otto before facing the old Czech man. 'What's that access road like?'

Otto spoke to the man in German, finding the man's explanation oddly accented. The old man spoke in an old Czech derivative of German, most words being fundamentally German but heavy in slang. Finally Otto faced the group. 'It is a gravel track, difficult in winter, but OK now. It is a single vehicle track and a small lorry

would use it with no problem, not steep. When he was a boy he helped the German Army moving boxes in and out of the mine.'

'Art treasure?' Johno asked. 'Ask him if the boxes were heavy?'

Otto translated. Finally he said, 'Some small and heavy, some large and not heavy. The German Army sealed the cave at the end of the war, they collapsed the tunnels.'

Beesely considered it. 'Small and heavy could be gold,' he quietly mused. With a slight frown he added, 'But the gold was moved in secret at the end of the war, they would not have used local boys. What else does he know?'

The manager answered, 'People came and tried to access the mine until 1965. He thinks they were searching for the gold. Many attempts were made to clear the main entrance, but always more rocks fell down. But he suggests that there are other entrances.'

'Question is,' Beesely began, 'did they find them and get in?' He leant forwards, his arms on the map. 'Does he know a second entrance?'

'Yes, but it is blocked with rocks, sir,' the manager informed him. 'It would need specialist equipment to move the rocks, which would attract the local authorities. Searching for such material requires a permit, new European safety considerations –'

'What?' Beesely puzzled. 'There are European Union conventions ... on searching for Nazi gold?'

'Not exactly, sir, just health and safety rules imposed by the Czech Republic and the European Union. Treasure hunters must declare ordnance, booby-traps and - of

course - any treasure found, for which they get a ten percent finders fee.'

'That's those that *do* declare it to the authorities,' Beesely scoffed. He eased back and glanced at Johnno. 'So, someone filled up the entrance. Maybe to cover their tracks, maybe done by the Americans after removing the gold -'

'No Americans, this is well into the Czech Republic, close to the Polish border,' Johnno pointed out. 'Russians would have done it.'

'Or the original German engineers, if they wanted what was inside ... *kept inside*,' Beesely countered.

'Probably another entrance,' Johnno muttered. 'Must be air-shafts.'

The old man raised a finger, exchanging a few words with Otto. 'He knows of an airshaft going down, easy to find. Maybe nine inches across.'

Johnno held his stomach. 'Rules me out. Thomas, you want to make a dollar?'

Beesely scowled at Johnno before returning his attention to the map. 'We'll get some experts, K2 men, have a look.' He focused on Otto with a concerned look. 'How did this man know to contact us?'

'He did not. He told the story to a German treasure hunter whom he saw in the newspapers. This man is known to us, he has found gold before when Gunter was alive.'

'Fine,' Beesely offered. 'Send in some experts, find another entrance or see if the main entrance can be opened, all done very quietly.'

Johnno straightened, making eye contact with Otto. 'How'll the Czech authorities react if they find out?'

‘We have people in place in the police and government.’ Otto shrugged. ‘Their government would want the gold, if there was any.’

‘So quietly does it,’ Beesely ordered. He rolled up the map and handed it back to the manager. ‘Give this nice gentlemen some money ... and ask him to keep it quiet. Take him back, but let’s use him as a guide.’

The elderly man was shown out by the manager, followed through the door by Otto. Thomas went back to his machinegun, observed by his tutor.

‘Sir?’ came from the desk phone.

Beesely pressed a button. ‘Yes?’

‘Dame Helen, sir.’

‘Ah, put her through.’

‘Beesely?’ came the dry and authoritative voice of Dame Helen Eddington-Small, director of MI6.

‘Yes, how are you?’

‘Back in work.’ She made it sound a complaint.

‘Excellent. How’s the leg?’

‘Not so bad, getting lots of sympathy,’ she explained.

Beesely made eye contact with Johno, remembering her daughter. ‘You take it easy, first week back and all.’

‘Mountain of bloody paperwork thanks to you!’

‘Me?’ Beesely teased, Johno laughing.

‘Yes, what with the dirty bomb, the Russians and the bio-labs we’re snowed under. Poor Willis has been flat out, files all over the floor.’

‘Sorry, Helen. I’ll take a long holiday and let you get some peace.’

‘Ha! You’d probably cause a coup in the Bahamas. Either that or the local volcano would explode.’ Johno laughed louder. ‘Is that face fungus?’ she called.

‘Present and correct, Ma’am,’ Johno teased.

‘Is he any better looking?’ she dryly enquired, Johno rubbing his moustache.

‘No,’ Beesely informed her, eyeing Johno with a slight frown. ‘He’s just teaching Thomas how to strip and assemble a large machinegun.’ Thomas glanced around at the mention of his name.

‘Like the damn kid isn’t dangerous enough now,’ she quietly pointed out.

‘Anyway, we’re off on a treasure hunt.’

‘Treasure hunt?’

‘Found an old Nazi mine with gold in it!’

‘Oh, excellent. I used to love things like that when I was a kid. Send me some photos.’

‘Will do. How are Susan and the gang?’

‘They’re fine, had them around two days ago. Tabitha is now joined at the hip to her youngest. They don’t live so far, easy enough to drop her for a stay over. Susan is still mothering me, but she’s back at work as well.’

‘How is dear old London these days?’

‘Terrible weather, terrible traffic ... same old torture chamber.’

‘I do hope you’re not considering retiring, young lady!’

‘No, not for a while. Fight the good fight.’

‘And if you need any help in that fight, you call.’

‘And if *you* need any help, *old man*, you call!’

‘Ouch! Is someone back into her stride already?’

‘Let me know about the treasure. Bye.’ The phone went dead.

‘She sounds better,’ Johno quietly pointed out.

‘Yes,’ Beesely sighed, easing back. ‘All the action here the other week was exactly what she needed to keep her focused.’

‘I understand,’ Johno began, gesturing with an open hand and a slight furrow of his brow, ‘but not *quite* seeing that as a positive thing.’

Herr Mole wandered in with a large pile of rolled plastic images stuffed under an arm.

‘Hey, hairy Mole,’ Johno said with a lazy wave.

Herr Mole frowned at Johno briefly as he laboured across to the desk and let the rolls of shiny paper drop.

Beesely helped him with them, opening the first one. ‘Satellite images?’

Herr Mole explained, in his slow and oddly accented voice, ‘Of the area of the mine.’

‘That was quick,’ Johno said without taking his gaze of Thomas’s efforts. He kicked the boy’s leg, Thomas sighing and pulling out the piece that obviously did not go where he wanted to shove it.

Beesely squinted across the desk. ‘Herr Mole?’

‘When I heard of the mine with the gold I knew you would not resist to look.’

Beesely was amused. ‘So you had satellite photos’ taken?’

‘No, sir. These are from Herr Stanton.’

‘Olly sent them?’ Beesely puzzled.

Johno glanced over his shoulder then stood.

‘They are thermal images,’ Herr Mole explained. ‘I have already located the airshafts. Four of them, fifty metre spacing in a line.’

Beesely held open a large image as Johno peered over his shoulder. The shafts were marked, four of them in a row at the top of the hill. They were in line with the blocked entrance and just a short distance from the track. ‘Is there a second way in?’

‘Not apparent here, sir. There is no second entrance visible within two kilometres.’

‘Could be further away,’ Johnno suggested, carefully studying the images. ‘Or filled in.’

Mole shook his head. ‘If there was another entrance close, but filled in, it would have a slightly different thermal fingerprint to the land around it - especially if anyone was working on it recently. Unless it has an entrance ... enclosed by natural rocks.’

Johnno glanced up at Mole. ‘An overhang or cliff base.’

‘Or the mine entrance was filled in fifty years ago,’ Mole pointed out. ‘In such a case the thermal image may not help.’

Beesely tapped the image. ‘This the best resolution?’

‘Yes, sir. The best technology.’

Beesely was disappointed. ‘Well, we may have to try and dig a hole through the rock fall.’ He eased back. ‘What do you think, Herr Mole? Gold in there?’

‘If there is something inside then it was placed in a bad position. This particular area was overrun by the Russians many weeks before the Americans over-ran parts of Bavaria. I think if it was valuable it would be in the west, not here.’

Johnno edged forwards. ‘Unless they were suddenly surrounded by the Russians and had no choice but to hide it quickly.’

‘It is a good idea, yes,’ Herr Mole agreed. ‘They may have had no fuel for the trucks to get back to Germany.’

‘So, retreating from the Russians,’ Beesely thought out loud. ‘Dumped it in a hurry and someone came back for it later.’

Johno coughed a short laugh. ‘Someone who had the ability to nip across one of the best guarded sections of the Iron Curtain!’

‘It is true,’ Mole agreed. ‘For Germans to return for the gold up to 1965 it would have been very difficult. Whoever was looking must have been Czech or Russian.’

‘Russian?’ Beesely considered, making a face. ‘They would have blown the top off the damn mountain to get at it if they thought there was gold in there, not popped back in just small groups. This all smacks of sneaking around.’

‘It is correct,’ Herr Mole agreed.

‘So not Russian then,’ Johno stated. ‘Locals. Czechs?’

Beesely rubbed his chin. ‘Seems more plausible. Someone thought that there was something in there, probably a local like our Czech visitor. Herr Mole, I have a project for you.’

‘Already started, sir.’ Herr Mole straightened and stood tall, all four foot eleven of him.

Beesely smiled widely, meeting Johno’s grin.

2

‘Dame Helen?’

‘Yes, who’s that?’ she puzzled.

‘Herr Mole, K2.’

‘Oh ... yes, I remember. How can I help?’

‘Treasure hunting.’

‘Ah, you’re researching the gold?’

‘Yes, Ma’am. We would like any historical documents from the joint British and American Army searches made for gold after 1945. In particular, any references to the Czech Republic, close to the Polish border.’

‘East German records might help. I don’t think the Russians co-operated at all, and they would certainly have kept the gold for themselves!’

‘The Americans have these records?’

‘Yes, they grabbed them the day the Berlin wall came down. Leave it with me, give me a couple of days, I have an uncle who worked on the files. Anyway, I’m surprised you’re asking for them instead of trying to steal them.’

‘I do not know what you mean, Ma’am. Thank you.’
He hung up.

3

The next morning Beesely sat writing at his desk when a small voice asked in German, ‘Are you the king?’

He looked towards the door of his apparently empty office before being startled by a six-year-old girl stood to his side, barely taller than the desk. He stared at her as she smiled up at him then glanced around his office again. Facing her he said, ‘Sorry?’

‘Are you the king?’ she repeated.

‘The king?’ Beesely repeated, taking off his glasses.

‘Of the castle?’ she explained.

‘Am I the king of the castle?’ he repeated with a frown, again glancing at the door. ‘Who ... who are you, young lady?’

‘Hildy Bach,’ she loudly announced. ‘My mother said you were the king of the castle.’

‘Your mother?’

‘She tells people who ... live in other places ... do not know what you say.’

Beesely smiled warmly at the girl. ‘She’s a translator?’

The girl gave it some thought, concluded by a firm, 'Yes.'

Beesely glanced at the open office door. 'And does your mother know that you're here?'

'Yes.'

'Oh.' He stood. 'I guess we had better find her then.'

Otto appeared in the doorway. 'Ah, Hildy, you have found the king.'

'Prince Otto. What, pray tell, is going on?'

Otto stepped in, trailed by six children of assorted sexes, ages and sizes. 'Today in Switzerland is the day when children go to the work of the parent to see what they do.'

'Ah,' Beesely let out. 'Have you asked the ghost to hide?'

'Ghost?' the children repeated.

'Oh, yes,' Beesely warned. 'Every castle has a ghost.'

The girl held his hand. He stared at it for a moment then led her towards the door.

Otto explained, 'There are helicopters on the grass, some of the older boys are on the shooting range and Johnno has a party of ten.'

'Ten?' Beesely repeated.

'He is a legend in the local school,' Otto explained. 'The teachers held a raffle of pupils to see who could visit him.'

'Correct me if I am wrong, but should not the children visit *their* parents.'

'Normally, yes. But this is K2 ... and some of the occupations are hard to describe or observe. I also think Thomas has been taking money from those wanting to visit Johnno.'

Beesely shot Otto a disapproving look.

The girl tugged his arm. 'Can we see the gold?'

'Top right draw, Your Majesty,' Otto informed Beesely.

Beesely sat, opening the top right draw as the children, none more than eight years old, closed in. He found gold wrapped chocolates and dozens of miniature gold bars, the same as that which Johno received on their first visit to the vaults in Zurich. He handed one to each child, warmly thanked by each in German. At the back of the draw rested a full-sized gold bar and Beesely struggled to lift it out and put it on the desk. The children gasped.

'Sorry,' Beesely offered. 'But this one is bit too heavy for you.'

The oldest boy tried to lift it anyway and struggled, letting it bang down.

'So, who has any questions?' Beesely asked.

'Are you a hundred years old?' asked a boy.

Beesely glanced at Otto, who was now fighting to suppress a grin. 'No. But some days I feel it, working here.'

'Thomas says you are one hundred years old!' the boy pressed. 'And that you built the castle.'

'Oh, he did ... did he?' Again Beesely glanced at Otto.

'Can I sit in the shiny car?' Hildy asked.

'Shiny car?' Beesely repeated.

'Johno's Mercedes SL, I believe,' Otto pointed out.

'Of course you can,' Beesely enthused. 'But first you must eat a lot of chocolate and ... put spare chocolate in your pockets for later when you're hungry. And don't worry about eating chocolate in the car, it's a magic car that cleans itself.'

He gave her several handfuls of chocolates as a female member of staff appeared in the doorway, Otto instructing the woman to take the girl and her friend to the car.

* * *

Johno ambled into Beesely's office as the last of the children departed two hours later.

Beesely stopped him with a hand. 'You'll have to sort your car.'

'My car?' Johno queried. 'Why?'

'A young girl nagged some member of staff to sit in it then threw up.'

'What?' Johno shrieked, managers looking up from the command centre. He strode quickly out, staff suppressing their laughter till he was out of earshot.

'Kids and chocolate,' Beesely sighed. 'Little buggers.'

* * *

Later that day Beesely's phone buzzed, Johno sat opposite him reading a newspaper. 'Sir?'

'Yes?'

'Sir, they have found a way into the mine in the Czech Republic.'

'Oh, excellent.'

Johno stood and approached the desk. 'Is it safe?' he called, loud enough for the operator to hear.

'Yes, sir.'

'When will it be opened?' Beesely keenly enquired.

'Tomorrow, sir.'

‘I want arrangements made, we will all be going. Aim to arrive in the morning, tell them to open it, but no one goes inside unless to make sure it is safe. Understood?’

‘Yes, sir.’

Beesely stood, a broad smile taking hold of his face. ‘I’m like an excited kid. Used to think about the Nazi treasures a lot after the war, always fancied having a go.’

Johno offered him a look of mock concern. ‘Most of it ended up in Gunter’s hands, it’s paying our electricity bill!’

‘Not this one, my boy! Not this one. This one was behind the Iron Curtain.’

Otto walked in. ‘We are going to the mine?’ he keenly enquired.

Beesely nodded. ‘Family day out in the country. Oh, separate helicopters, or should we drive?’

‘It is a beautiful drive, but maybe three, four hours.’

Beesely grimaced. ‘OK, helicopters at 8am. No problem with the Czech authorities ... to fly in?’

Otto shook his head as Johno stepped up to him. ‘Get us some good digital cameras, one each, spare memory chips.’

Otto nodded. ‘To record the first images for sixty years!’

‘Plenty of torches and batteries,’ Johno added.

Otto creased a cheek. ‘Herr Mole has everything in hand. He left with the equipment last night.’

‘Is the dwarf fucking psychic or something?’ Johno asked with a frown.

‘No,’ Beesely said with a grin. ‘Just damn good.’

A manager walked in and handed Otto an A4 photograph, quickly retreating.

‘A new hotel for us to buy,’ Otto announced, handing the photograph to Beesely.

‘It needs work,’ Beesely grumbled after a quick glance.

‘It is available free, if we renovate it and use it as a hotel.’

‘Free?’ Beesely repeated. ‘Where is it?’

Otto clasped his hands behind his back. ‘About three kilometres from a certain Czech mine.’

‘Ah, I see. Yes, good idea. Grab it, do up some rooms, get the guards in there ready, store the equipment.’ Beesely stopped, glanced at Johnno, who folded his arms, then back to Otto. ‘I’m wasting my breath, aren’t I?’

Otto nodded. ‘Already organized.’

‘Herr Mole?’

Otto raised a professional Swiss eyebrow. ‘No. I do *some* work here myself.’

Beesely nodded, hiding a smile and glancing at Johnno. ‘And when this hotel is finished?’ he asked Otto.

‘It is a beautiful location with large gardens, a small river, nature walks, good views. We will have no problem to find the visitors.’

‘Sounds like a good investment,’ Johnno pointed out. ‘Must be a lot like that in Eastern Europe.’

Otto firmly nodded his agreement.

Beesely eased back into his seat, staring out of focus. ‘Otto, it could be a useful exercise. See what we can find. They will also provide safe houses for our agents in the east.’

‘I will assign a manager to the project.’ Otto turned.

‘Oh, Otto,’ Beesely whispered, standing. ‘What about the wedding?’ Johnno closed in.

‘Saturday. Zurich,’ Otto cautiously informed them before sternly added, ‘If nothing is a problem here.’

Beesely held up his hands. ‘Nothing on the radar, no one shooting at us.’

‘Good. Let us hope all is quiet.’ Otto turned on a heel and left.

‘Sounds a bit pissed off,’ Johno noted.

Beesely sat, sighing loudly. ‘Think of the grief she must be giving him, especially if he’s not telling her everything that’s happening here.’

‘Glad I’m single.’

Beesely lowered his head, studying Johno from over the rim of his glasses. ‘Johno, I don’t think your marital status has anything to do with pressures of work.’

4

The next morning three K2 helicopters sat on the lawn of the newly acquired hotel, an old chateau made in the French style; three-storey, twenty rooms, red tiled roof.

‘These gardens look tended,’ Beesely commented as they stepped away from the helicopters.

Otto explained, ‘A local man with this hobby of the garden tends them.’

‘Give him some money and keep him on, they’re very good.’

Even Johno thought they were good. He waved Beesely and Otto over to the side of the large château. ‘Look at that!’ he let out, pointing into the distance.

They all took in the view. The front and right side of the chateau afforded a clear view down a gentle slope towards the village, some ten kilometres of uninterrupted vista; woods and mountains, rivers and pastures.

‘It’ll make one hell of an advert for the place,’ Beesely enthused.

‘Could make a nice water feature of that stream,’ Johnno suggested, pointing at the large rocks placed in the stream’s path to slow the flow and pool the water.

‘No,’ Otto cut in. ‘The spring water level is maybe a metre higher.’

‘That’ll fuck-up the Koi Carp,’ Johnno suggested. ‘Little buggers will have to swim fast.’

‘Dig a diversion trench, or pipe,’ Beesely suggested with a dismissive wave. ‘Just let in enough water for the gardens.’

Otto made a mental note as Herr Mole limped across the lawn towards them.

‘Oh dear,’ Beesely began. ‘Mole’s on the lawn.’

Johnno laughed loudly as the small man approached.

‘How are things?’ Beesely asked Herr Mole as he eventually reached them.

Mole tipped his head politely. ‘If you will come inside, we have found some interesting documents in the roof space.’

‘Nazi?’ Johnno asked.

‘Wehrmacht,’ Herr Mole corrected him. ‘They show who used this chateau during the war.’

‘Ah, excellent,’ Beesely approved. ‘Make an interesting historic display for the guests. I hear they are turning Colditz into a hotel.’

‘Depends on who the guests are,’ Johnno cautioned as they walked. ‘If they’re German or British, fine ... they might find it interesting. Poles and Russians *won’t* be so amused.’

‘He’s got a point,’ Beesely mentioned to Otto as they walked in.

The inside of the chateau had seen better days. The glass in all the internal doors was cracked or missing, the floors strewn with rubble and the plaster peeling off the walls and ceiling. Paths had been made through the rubble by guards, the downstairs rooms made basically habitable with supplies piled on tables.

‘Now that’s ... a table!’ Johno commended. They all stood back and glanced at the monstrous wooden table, at least twenty feet long and with ten sets of sturdy legs. ‘Back in the UK that would be worth a fortune.’

‘It is French,’ Herr Mole informed them.

‘Pinched during the war?’ Johno asked.

‘No, it is in some very old photographs, 1914.’

They advanced on the table contents; books, ledgers, documents and files - all very old and dusty.

Johno picked up a newspaper. ‘1943! This’ll be worth something by itself.’ He gave it to Thomas, for the boy to read the front page.

‘Is anything relevant here?’ Beesely enquired as he scanned the documents.

‘One document refers to an underground facility,’ Mole informed him, tapping a grey ledger.

‘What does it say?’ Beesely pressed.

‘It is unusual. I do not understand its use, this facility. It refers to the training of staff in etiquette and foreign customs.’

Beesely puzzled that explanation. ‘German agents were trained here? Before being sent to work undercover around Europe?’

‘I believe so,’ Mole agreed. ‘Maybe also German liaison officers for occupied countries.’

‘Why would they do that in secret?’ Otto asked. ‘In the Czech Republic and not Berlin. It makes no sense.’

Herr Mole opened a ledger. ‘As I said, these documents are not clear. Some papers are for the regional Wehrmacht governor, nothing unusual.’ Mole finally looked up.

‘Let’s have a specialist analyse them,’ Beesely ordered. ‘Fly one in.’ He clapped his hands together. ‘Right, to the mine.’

Herr Mole’s team had arrived the night before, six Range Rovers now parked at the front of the chateau. Now the intrepid explorers climbed in, starting the five-minute drive up to the mine through a gently inclining wood. The final half-mile presented a rough ride along a poor track, the passengers glad to be in Range Rovers with four-wheel drive. They pulled into a shaded opening and jumped down.

Herr Mole raised an arm and pointed. ‘The main entrance, blocked with rocks, is one kilometre further on this track.’

His arm pointed to the right and not in the direction of the track they were on. Noticing Johno making fun of his pointing he explained, ‘This track curves around the hill. The second entrance is fifty metres through the trees.’

‘Close enough to carry heavy boxes from the road,’ Johno pointed out, lighting up. Otto glanced around the wooded area and the partial view of the chateau valley.

Beesely took in the view of the nearby woodland, gently sloping away from them. ‘What’s the assessment on the main entrance?’

Herr Mole joined Beesely and Otto peering down the wooded slope, all now stood in the shade of a large tree. ‘Three or more days minimum. Preferably seven days. But that would be with heavy equipment. With stealth, maybe a year.’

‘Is it possible that this is a separate mine?’ Beesely asked, turning and facing the track through the trees and starting to step slowly towards it.

Mole conceded, ‘It is possible, but the direction it takes and the altitude it is at ... makes it lead very closely towards the other mine entrance.’ He led the way, slowly limping into the woods, a track visible through the scrub.

Johnno followed behind with Thomas. ‘OK boys and girls, today’s guide will be Hairy Mole, making a rare daylight appearance above ground. Please stay together and don’t drop litter in the forest. Remember, only leave behind good wishes and footsteps campers, only take away good memories and photographs.’

Thomas laughed. ‘Yogi Bear!’

The woods they navigated through were dense and old, but the path was wide enough not to be a hindrance. At some point the trees must have been cut down to enhance the path, Johnno considered, noting some stumps still visible. After ten yards they approached two guards sat on a log, camouflage clothing and sniper rifles. They exchanged greetings with Johnno. As Beesely approached they stood and welcomed the party to the forest.

The path’s gradient then increased before finally widening into a large shaded opening some ten yards across. Collapsible tables and chairs were already laid out in a half-circle, several guards sat at the edges of the clearing. The camp stood littered with reels of ropes and climbing equipment, lights, helmets and cases of unknown goodies.

The old Czech man had been sitting down but now eased up next to a large, oddly dressed and portly man that appeared as if he was attending a turn of the century deer hunt.

‘It’s Sherlock Holmes’ big brother,’ Johnno whispered.

‘Sir Beesely, I am Hechter Koch,’ the big man said as he shook hands with Beesely, Johnno and Thomas busy examining equipment. ‘I was hunting the gold with Herr Gunter,’ he added in his heavily accented Germanic voice.

Beesely studied him for a moment, gently nodding. ‘And ... how did you like Gunter?’

Koch seemed confused. ‘Like ... him?’

‘Did you *like* Gunter?’ Beesely repeated.

‘People did not like Herr Gunter, sir, they survived him.’

Beesely smiled and nodded. ‘A good answer.’ He glanced around the camp. ‘So, what have you found?’

‘The entrance here was camouflaged and covered in wood and soil so your people removed the wood. Inside was a collapsed entrance, but close to the beginning and not so difficult to remove the stones.’ Koch pointed into the woods, at a pile of rubble just visible some ten yards away.

Koch continued, ‘Inside was a metal door with a very old lock. Your people broke the lock and we opened the door. Inside is a tunnel that leads to a larger tunnel. There are two or three skeletons in this tunnel.’

‘Ah, so whoever blocked this place up did it in a hurry,’ Beesely thought out loud.

‘I think so,’ Koch agreed. ‘These people died in the tunnel in their clothes and shoes and with their glasses on their faces.’

Beesely shook his head. ‘Slow starvation, a terrible way to go.’

‘I can think of worse,’ Otto muttered, loud enough for them to hear.

Beesely glanced at him. ‘Yes, quite. So, shall we?’

Otto put a hand on Beesely's arm. 'I would prefer if you did not.'

Beesely stared back at him.

'He's right,' Johnno suggested, closing in. 'You could trip and hit your head. Let the troops in first.' He folded his arms.

Beesely stiffened. 'Ganging up on me, are we?'

Thomas closed in and folded his arms.

Mole stepped closer. 'Sir, it would make me very sad if you had an accident in there.'

'God, stop wet-nursing me,' Beesely pleaded, hiding his smile as Otto firmly gestured him towards a seat. 'OK, Herr Koch, Johnno, go have a look.'

'And Thomas,' Johnno shot in.

'Why?' Beesely questioned, not looking happy.

'I promised him that if he behaved he would get a look inside,' Johnno explained, shrugging and avoiding eye contact.

Now Beesely folded his arms. 'And what, pray tell, did the little monster do - exactly - to earn a reward?'

'He didn't shoot any ducks on the lake yesterday,' Johnno quietly ventured, lowering his head and checking his shoes.

'Oh, well, in that case we should reward him,' Beesely sarcastically let out.

'And he only shot two ducks the day before,' Otto dryly mentioned.

Beesely waved them away and sat with the Czech man, joined by Otto sitting next to him. 'You don't want a look?' Beesely asked Otto.

Otto glanced at the entrance. 'I have a wedding, so no risks.'

Beesely nodded, patting Otto's leg as guards prepared coffee and nibbles. 'I think we should identify the bodies, then send them home afterwards, back to Germany.' Otto agreed.

The explorers geared up; helmets, torches, packs of spare batteries, ropes, first aid kits, back-up lamps and gas detectors. They were weighted down. Herr Koch led the way, followed by a K2 caver, Johnno and Thomas bringing up the rear whilst Herr Mole studied a map laid out on a table.

The tunnel height was a pleasant surprise, Johnno found, no need to duck down. The first twenty yards offered chiselled rock with some rusted pipe-work running along both the ceiling and floor corners, a few rusted old cables visible. They stepped past two skeletons in sequence. Thomas wanted to take some finger bones with him, but that just earned him a slap on his helmet from Johnno. As they penetrated deeper the temperature seemed to drop with every footstep, the dampness increasing. Then the smell hit them.

After a further ten yards they came to another strong metal door, finding it unlocked. It creaked open on rusted hinges, staying fixed firmly at the angle it had been coaxed opened to. The door housed a viewing slide for people inside to look out through, or maybe to shoot out of, Johnno considered. Beyond it they found a larger tunnel, but this time with smooth concrete walls.

Johnno held up his torch and ran a hand over the damp concrete. 'This was carefully made.'

Koch closed in. 'Yes, it was a facility, not a mine. A mine before, but after made into quarters.'

They shone their lights down the dead-straight tunnel, not seeing the other end.

‘At least it’s solid and safe,’ Johnno commented, holding onto Thomas’s shoulder as they passed another skeleton. ‘Lot of people got stuck in here,’ he mentioned, frowning at the remains as he passed them.

This latest skeleton wore a large pair of boots on stick thin legs, the boots looking oddly too large. The hair and teeth were still clearly visible; long blonde hair and a good set of teeth, a woman in white coat. They skirted around the bones and walked on, picking up the pace. Then they could hear running water from up ahead. From a crack in the concrete a steady flow of water ran down a wall and pooled, causing them to slosh through a half inch of water.

‘There is a door!’ Thomas called out.

The door they came to was wooden, looking similar to an ordinary factory door. It housed a cracked glass pane at the top.

Johnno ran his torch-beam around the edges of the door and through the grimy glass, halting Koch with a hand. ‘Back up five yards. You too Thomas.’ They slowly stepped backwards as asked.

The door leant open a fraction, Johnno running a hand around as much of it as he could; no wires, so no makeshift grenade traps. Even after sixty years, he figured, a grenade might still work. Sheltering close to one wall he eased the door open with his foot and scanned the area. Inside he could see ... a car. He kicked the door fully open. It squeaked and bounced back as the others stepped closer.

‘Ein auto?’ Koch puzzled as their torch beams penetrated the blackness.

Then the smell from the room hit them. It reminded Johnno of something very old and decaying, but not the bodies. He puzzled over it; maybe old cloth, maybe leather seats or tyres - which were flat. He stepped slowly inside

and carefully inspected the door entrance, examining the frame and looking for potential booby-traps.

‘Johno!’ crackled from Koch’s radio, startling them all.

Johno took a breath then grabbed the radio. ‘Yeah?’ he snapped.

‘Anything?’ Beesely asked.

‘A car!’

‘A car?’

‘Yeah, some old 1940s car, probably worth a few quid, well preserved. Tyres flat, mind you, so get the bicycle pump.’

‘How did they get a car in there?’ crackled from the radio.

‘The other entrance,’ Johno said towards the radio, sounding a little sarcastic. ‘Not this one. Call you when we find something less dusty.’ He handed Koch the radio.

‘This radio will not work if we turn a corner,’ Koch idly informed him.

Johno glanced back down the tunnel to the blurred white blob that represented the entrance as Thomas peered inside the car. The boy screamed and dropped his torch. They spun around, closing in on the car. In the driver’s seat sat a skeleton looking directly out at them, its mouth hanging open.

Johno laughed and picked up Thomas’s torch, handing it to him. ‘Scaredy-cat!’

‘I am not scared!’ Thomas protested. ‘I was surprised.’

‘*Surprised*,’ Johno corrected the boy.

In a coordinated ballet of movement Johno and Koch shone their torches around the large room. They illuminated a small wooden office in a corner, cables and

pipes around the concrete walls, a high ceiling of maybe twenty feet and a lorry ten yards away.

Johno turned to the K2 caver. 'Look in the car, we'll check the back of the lorry.'

Koch walked quickly towards the tarpaulin covered lorry, John and Thomas walking briskly to catch up, everyone's footsteps echoing. They unclipped the tailgate and lowered the rusted metal with a loud screech. Inside was empty.

'Bugger,' Johno muttered.

'This is odd,' Koch said, shining his light at the lorry's number plate.

'What is?'

'This number plate is from *after* the war.'

'After the war? Can't be, unless the people looking for the gold brought it in.'

'They must have, this license is from 1947!' Koch insisted, bent double and rubbing dust off the number plate.

'If they brought it in to fetch something out then why's it still here?' Johno said, as much to himself as Koch. They glanced at each other.

The K2 caver joined them. 'Nothing in the car. And that car is 1948, sir.'

'Odd,' Johno puzzled.

'Something else, sir,' the caver began. 'No way out.'

'What?' Johno snapped, glancing back at the entrance, the bright beam of daylight still evident. He breathed out heavily, glaring at the caver.

'No, sir - *for the lorry!* No door big enough.'

As a group they moved around to the other side of the lorry. The wall did house a door, a normal *man-sized* door, the rest was all smooth concrete floor to ceiling. Johno and

Koch glanced at each other, before splitting up and circling the room, finding no exit big enough for the car or the lorry. They met back in the middle looking very confused.

‘There is only one explanation,’ Koch insisted, waving a finger. ‘One wall was built after the lorry and car were placed here.’

‘So why leave them here?’ Johnno questioned as he continued to scan the walls. ‘Why not move them out first instead of wasting them?’

‘Maybe they are kaput?’ Thomas suggested.

‘*Broken. Bro-ken!* Could still be pushed out and fixed,’ Johnno insisted.

‘Unless the main entrance had a problem and the vehicles could not fit,’ Koch offered.

Johnno considered it. ‘Then why build a concrete wall, *after* the main entrance was blocked?’ They again shone their torches around the large room.

‘It is very odd,’ Koch muttered.

Johnno walked to a wall and banged it with his fist. Noticing a slime-covered hammer at his feet he hit the wall, finding it solid. He progressed along the wall, tapping it hard. At the next wall he repeated the exercise. The wall next to the entrance was pointless so he tried the final wall. In the middle it sounded hollow. ‘There’s something behind this wall!’

Koch banged it with his fist. ‘So we go through the man-door and look to the left.’

With Johnno in the lead they advanced on the wooden door, finding that it opened towards them, making it easier to check for bobby-traps. They quickly checked for wires before edging it open twelve inches, checking again for booby-traps. It was all clear. With his audience peering

keenly into the gloom Johno waved his torch beam around the even larger room that they now found. This new room housed a dozen large machines, all rust covered; lathes, cutters and workbenches. Numerous large metal plates leant stacked against the wall, tools, spades and pick-axes littering the floor.

‘Seems clear,’ Johno said, nudging the door open further with his foot. Stepping inside he shone his searchlight beam around the cavernous enclosure.

Thomas stepped up. ‘Vot is it?’

‘Some sort of machine room, for making stuff,’ Johno quietly explained.

‘Vot stuff?’

‘Wu ... what ... what stuff?’ he corrected. Looking up at the high ceiling he quietly admitted, ‘Don’t ... know.’

The rumble built quickly, Johno and Thomas staring ahead. Next came a piercing screech that made them wince; it seemed to be all around them, shaking their insides. A heavy thud was followed by a lot of dust being thrown up from behind them, engulfing them and smothering their torch beams. They spun around.

* * *

Guido Pepi read the single page report. Lifting his eyes he asked his assistant, ‘Could it be they believe the treasure is in this place in the Czech Republic?’ The question was as much to himself as the man who had delivered the report. He shook his head, a slight furrow of his brow. ‘No, Gunter would not have moved it.’

‘There is no ... *solid* evidence that Gunter had the treasure, or the files, sir,’ the man reminded Pepi.

Pepi let out a loud sigh. ‘That’s true,’ he admitted. ‘So, why are they looking here? And *what* ... are they looking for?’

‘The missing Austrian gold was never accounted for, sir.’

Pepi made a face, giving a slight shrug. ‘It would be worth the effort, but K2 is not short of money. They did very well out of the volatility in the UK stock markets, this man Beesely was very cunning. He saw the opportunity and took it. I like him, and the way he thinks.’

He eased back into his chair. ‘Find out all we can about this place and what they are up to, keeping a discreet distance.’

No light at the end of the tunnel

1

The doorway had gone, Johnno's torch now revealing a rust-coloured metal sheet some two metres wide and four meters tall. And the K2 caver lay on the floor.

They rushed to him, kneeling down immediately, the visibility drastically reduced by swirls of choking dust. The man was trapped under the metal sheet, lying face down. Johnno shone his torch along the man's upper body, realising immediately that the sheet touched the floor and had sliced straight through the middle of the man's back. The man's eyes bulged as blood gurgled from his mouth. He coughed once and slumped.

'Koch!' Johnno screamed, shining his torch around the room and trying to see through the dust. 'Koch!'

No answer came back. Then came a tapping noise, obvious now that Koch stood on the other side of the metal sheet, hitting it with the hammer. Johnno stood up and hit the door with his torch butt a few times to signal that they were OK.

He waited. No more tapping came, so he figured Koch must be on his way out.

'We are trap-ed?' Thomas quietly asked, not sounding too concerned, the boy's position only known from a dust-blurred point of light.

'Beesely will get us out,' Johnno assured him, coughing, and wishing all the time that he believed his own words.

The metal sheet slotted into guide rails, the rusted metal an inch thick and weighing at least one tonne in Johnno's estimation. Above it he found no cables, just hooks. However it had got up there the mechanism for

lifting it had long since been removed. And deliberately, he figured. Fixed into the ceiling he noted a rusted pulley mechanism, studied with his torch and barely visible in the grey half-light created by the dust.

‘We will be OK,’ Thomas confidently suggested in his accented voice.

‘Yeah, what do you know that I don’t?’ Johno quietly asked as he shone his torch around the edges of the metal plate, a hand now over his mouth.

‘You are the best, you will find the way out.’

Johno allowed himself a quick smile. ‘You Boy, me Tarzan.’

They turned, cutting the swirling dust with their torch beams and starting to cough harder.

‘Be careful, there’s a lot of rusty old metal in here. If you cut your hand it’ll be infected quickly.’ Johno picked up the cavers’ torch and turned it off, stuffing it in inside his ropes. ‘Let’s go find a way out, shall we?’

‘We should not be here ... waiting?’ Thomas quietly asked.

Johno took two steps and scanned ahead. ‘That metal plate is strong, so maybe eight hours to cut, an hour or two to get equipment. Do you want to wait here ten hours?’ He glanced down at Thomas’s ghost-like outline, the boy shaking his head.

* * *

‘Hilfe! Hilfe!’

Beesely and Otto jumped up as Koch reached the entrance. Guards came running from the trees.

‘There has been ... an accident!’ Koch got out between laboured breaths. ‘A metal door ... came down ... killed...’

‘Killed?’ Beesely demanded in a strong whisper. ‘Killed who?’ He shook Koch’s large frame.

‘The cave exploring man,’ Koch got out. ‘Killed that man... metal door ... John and boy inside.’

Otto clicked his fingers at two guards. ‘Inside!’

The men grabbed torches and ran inside as Koch was helped to a seat. The big man was clearly not used to the excitement, or the exercise.

Herr Mole raised his phone. Calmly he said, ‘Alarm! Johnno and Thomas trapped inside mine. Send metal cutting equipment immediately. Bring doctors and medics as per rescue plan: Mole-Alpha.’

Beesely glanced over his shoulder briefly as he helped Koch, listening to the call for assistance. ‘Tell us what happened?’

‘We found a room ... with a car ... and a lorry in.’

‘A lorry?’ Beesely queried.

Koch nodded. ‘Yes, but there was ... no door for the car or lorry ... only ... a door big enough for a man.’

‘What?’ Beesely queried. ‘A lorry in a room with no doors?’

‘Yes,’ Koch explained. ‘It was very strange. The concrete wall ... it was ... built after the lorry was inside.’

‘That makes no sense,’ Otto calmly suggested. He approached Mole. ‘Has everything necessary been requested?’

‘Yes, cutting torches for this metal door. But I must see this door first.’

‘Go,’ Otto firmly ordered.

Guards came running up the track along with the camouflaged snipers.

‘Set a perimeter,’ Otto instructed them. ‘We will be here a long time. Bring up tents, clear the forest here and make the track to the road wider. Send for another twenty men.’

* * *

Johno led the way, carefully skirting around the lathes and other bits of machinery, Thomas right behind. As they progressed forwards, spidery shadows on the walls moved backwards.

They noticed a door ahead, directly opposite the blocked entrance and similar to the one they had come through in the tunnel. Johno checked above the exit, finding no metal sheets or slides. He poked his torch through the partially open door, revealing a small passageway. Kicking the door hard he stepped back and waited. Nothing, just a deathly silence punctuated by infrequent drops of water coming from somewhere up ahead.

He leant into the doorway and glanced upwards, scanning for traps, wires or pulleys, then down for pressure plates on the floor. All seemed clear. Awkwardly leaning in he carefully peered upwards, examining the area immediately above the door with his torch. He found a low ceiling just a few feet higher than the doorframe. ‘OK.’

They walked through.

‘Stay close to me. If we’re *trap-ed*, at least we’ll be *trap-ed* together.’

The area they came to next was more akin a passageway than a room, just plain concrete walls and another skeleton lying face down. The smell was also getting worse, Johnno could taste it on the back of his tongue. The complex was damp and cold and the stink of old concrete pervasive.

Whispering as they walked, Johnno said, ‘All things considered, when I was working for the SAS and MI6 ... I’d never considered that I would go up against sixty year-old Nazi booby-traps ... in a fucking cave.’ His words echoed back along passageway as they slowly progressed, a distorted ‘hiss’.

Thomas did not fully understand as he trailed behind. They turned the corner and stopped, flashing their lights. Johnno stopped dead, straightening and staring wide-eyed at what they found. For almost a minute he shone his torch around the cavernous room they had stepped into, shocked into silence.

‘What is it?’ Thomas finally asked, peeking out from behind Johnno.

Johnno frowned hard at the scene. ‘What it is ... is a very accurate reproduction of an old English street from the 1940s. It’s like ... like on a film set.’ He highlighted what he described. ‘There’s the Dog and Duck pub, Wilson the Butchers, Martin’s Bank, a dress shop and some houses.’ He shone his torch down the ‘street’, the beam not penetrating to the end, then over the high ceiling. The smooth concrete walls behind the mock buildings rose to around twenty feet, above that chiselled rock, the ceiling narrowing to a point. As they stood there, delicate swirls of dust followed them as if ghosts evacuating the machine room. ‘Welcome to Coronation Street, folks.’

They stepped up to the open pub door and walked inside. The faded mat said, 'Welcome'.

Holding the boy by the shoulder and looking serious Johnno said, 'Thomas, don't tell anyone I took you into a pub!'

Inside, they found a perfect re-creation of an old English pub; bar stools, small tables, ashtrays, a billiards table, dartboard ... and countless rows of bottles behind the bar. On the bar top they noticed a copy of The Mail newspaper from 1942 next to a paraffin lamp. Johnno shook it, noting the liquid before lighting it. He wound up the wick, the flame throwing a moderate yellow glow around the pub.

'Turn your torch off,' Johnno suggested. 'Save the batteries.'

They both placed their torches on the dusty bar, followed by their ropes and bits of kit, Johnno ducking under the bar hatch and to the bottles.

'They will be horrible!' Thomas cautioned.

'No, some drinks last a long time.' Johnno handled a malt whisky, pulling out the loosely placed cork with his teeth and making a 'pop'. He sniffed. 'Yeah, good.' He put the cork firmly back in and placed the bottle on the bar, Thomas reading the bottle's faded label.

'What was that?' Thomas suddenly whispered, snapping his head around.

'A rat,' Johnno explained as he studied the bottles. 'Probably a very big one.'

'I am not afraid!' Thomas spat out.

'You will be later,' Johnno suggested as he touched the grubby labels of several bottles.

'Why later?'

‘It may take a day to open that metal door. Maybe two.’ He turned. ‘We have to sleep here.’

‘I am OK,’ Thomas firmly insisted.

Johnno opened the till, finding old English pounds and coins. He handed them to Thomas. ‘I remember now what this place is.’

‘You have been here before?’

‘No, dope. I remember reading that German agents in England were often caught because their English wasn’t any good or their knowledge of English customs ... like this money.’

Thomas examined the currency. ‘It is strange-ed.’

‘Pounds, shillings, pennies and farthings, I think. I could never understand it. My grandmother tried to explain it once. She lost me, so no chance for the big strapping German spies.’

‘They practis-ed here?’

‘Yep,’ Johnno answered. Then he stopped dead and frowned, studying a wartime notice on the wall: Dig for victory! ‘But don’t know why it needs to be underground, could have been anywhere, unless they were worried about the bombing? But then again, by time they were that worried about the bombing this far in the war was lost. So fuck knows.’

He ducked back under the bar hatch and grabbed the paraffin lamp. ‘C’mon, let’s go explore. Not like we got anything frigging else to do.’

The butcher’s shop was, thankfully, empty of dated produce. It did, however, have a butcher - traditionally dressed and sat waiting ready for customers at the back of the shop and quite, quite dead. So they raided the till again, finding more notes and coins, Thomas stuffing his pockets.

Next they entered a clothes shop populated with numerous life-sized manikins, all fully clothed with smart ladies dresses.

Johno tapped Thomas on the shoulder and pointed. 'Back in those days women wanted to wear a pair of velvet curtains instead of using them for the windows.' With Thomas considering ladies fashion of years gone by, running a hand over the strange material, Johno raided the till.

Thomas tapped the breasts of a manikin. 'Plastic,' he said with a grin.

'Don't you just hate that,' Joho quipped.

Next came a replica house. Johno knocked. 'Hello, anyone home?'

Thomas laughed. Picking up a stone he broke the nearest of the bay windows. 'Hello?' he repeated, his call echoing from several directions. The door leant open so they entered in single file.

'Wipe your feet,' Johno insisted, both now stopping and scraping their feet on the old mat. In the hallway Johno ran a hand over the wallpaper, Thomas copying.

'It feels strange-ed,' Thomas noted.

'That's how the paper was back then. The patterns in the paper made it warmer, I think. Houses didn't have central heating like today, they had open log fires or coal.'

A glass-fronted, knitted picture said 'Bless this house.' Being Swiss, Thomas took a moment to make sure it hung squarely.

The lounge was surprisingly cosy; cold, dusty, damp and dark, but cosy compared to outside. They tried the sofa and the chairs in turn. Grabbing his lighter, Johno threw a damp old newspaper into the empty fireplace and

lit it. It burnt, slowly, and the smoke was going somewhere other than back into the room.

‘Toasty. Might stay here tonight if we’re stuck.’

The next room had a wooden drop-leaf table laid out with a china tea set.

Johno put a hand to the teapot. ‘Cold. Bugger.’

They tried the wooden chairs.

‘OK,’ Thomas said with a shrug.

The mantelpiece had been tiled, an old iron fireguard leant against the fireplace. Thomas opened and closed it like an accordion. On the mantelpiece stood a dated wind-up clock, complete with key, bracketed uniformly by two china dog ornaments. Thomas adjusted the ornaments till they were equidistant and balanced. Turning fully around they could see a glass-fronted bookcase and so opened the doors, each taking out a dusty book.

‘Charge of the Light Brigade,’ Johno laughed. ‘I read this, or a later version.’

‘This name is German?’

Johno peered through the dark, pulling the lamp closer. ‘Beatrix Potter. No, *English*, books for children.’

‘Beatrix is German.’

‘Really? Well there you go, I learnt something new.’

The kitchen was sparsely equipped; an old rolling pin, wooden chopping board, rusted cheese grater, some rusted cutlery and an old thick-rimmed milk bottle with a faded note in it.

Thomas read the note. ‘Two pints please.’

‘Don’t forget the Gold Top,’ Johno quipped as he examined an old wall calendar. ‘Let’s check the beds we might be sleeping in, see if Goldilocks is up for a shag.’

The narrow stairs creaked as they climbed, Johno holding out the lamp as far forward as it would go and

checking the landing and the bedrooms. Everything seemed safe, no booby-traps. The beds were neatly made and throwing off the dusty and mouldy top-sheet revealed some acceptably dirty and damp blankets underneath.

‘No pisser,’ Thomas noted.

‘*Toilet*,’ Johno corrected. ‘No *toilet*.’

‘You and the English soldiers say *pisser*!’

‘It’s not good English,’ Johno patiently explained.

‘Don’t say it then. There ... is ... no ... toilet.’

‘Good. In those days they didn’t have a toilet in the house, it was outside. Use the sink, I do.’

‘Look!’ Thomas screeched.

Johno followed the boy’s pointed finger to the bottom of the wardrobe, where a skeletal finger hung out. ‘We can see you,’ he sang out before easing the door open.

He slumped onto the bed with a loud squeak. Concerned. Thomas was surprised, correctly recognising the uniform worn by the skeleton. It was a Russian uniform, an officer, in the wardrobe of a mock English house in a German built cave in the Czech Republic.

Johno stared long and hard before reaching in and checking the uniform pockets, finding an ID card dated to 1955. ‘Oh ... shit.’

‘What is it?’ Thomas gasped.

Johno breathed out long and hard. ‘This wasn’t built by the Germans in the war, it was built by the Russians after the war to train their agents to spy in England.’

2

Koch suddenly sat upright. ‘The wall!’

‘What?’ Otto queried, staring hard at him.

Koch continued, 'There is a wall, a false wall, on the left. We may be able to break through.'

Otto glanced at Beesely, who gave a small shrug, then turned to a guard, 'Tools, metal bars. The wall on the left, try and break through. Quickly!' The guard ran down the trail as two others headed back inside.

Bright lamps were now laid out around the large chamber, making everything a dull grey with long shadows of the vehicles rising up the smooth grey walls.

The first guard back in shouted to the occupants, 'The wall on the left is false. We must break through!'

Herr Mole had been banging the metal sheet with the side of his fist, making an estimate of its thickness, repeating the human seismic-charge exercise with the wall near it. That wall he estimated to be eighteen inches of concrete and possibly with metal reinforcing. Now Mole limped to the wall in question and started to tap it. In the corner he turned and tapped the next wall before turning back to the wall in question. Moving along its length he tapped several times with the hammer as he went, high and low.

Finally he returned to the middle. 'There is a section of wall here which is thinner, maybe six to eight inches of concrete. It is approximately three metres wide.' He focused on the truck, the guards following his gaze.

'Big enough for the lorry?' a man enquired.

'Yes,' Mole replied. 'It would appear so. But we will need more than this small hammer.'

'We have fifty calibre rifles in the car,' the guard offered.

Mole faced the man, looking up through his tick glasses. 'That would be a strange way of making a hole. But since the tools are not here yet you may proceed.'

Everyone else outside, please.’ The guards disappeared into the blurred shaft of light, Mole limping slowly after them.

‘Fifty calibre?’ Beesely repeated, standing up.

‘It is a short term desperation method, sir,’ Herr Mole explained. ‘But may make a hole. That hole may provide fresh air inside, also a method of communication.’

‘Yes, good idea,’ Beesely realised. ‘Should be able to stick a radio through and boost the signal.’

Otto agreed as two guards ran up the path with .50 calibre M82’s, a third guard labouring with a heavy ammunition box.

‘Ear defenders!’ Beesely shouted, the men stopping and glancing at each other. ‘In *there* ... the blasts will rupture your eardrums.’

‘We will have to improvise with cloth, sir.’

‘Do so, carefully,’ Beesely ordered before waving them on.

Sloshing through the water in the tunnel the three guards struggled along, quickly setting down the large rifles just inside the chamber and opening the bipods as the third guard loaded ten round magazines.

‘These are armour-piercing, but we only have twenty.’ They cocked the weapons.

The third man tapped the nearest rifleman on the shoulder. ‘Good luck. Come out when ready.’

It took several minutes to tear up bits of 4x2 gun cleaning cloth and make earplugs, wrapping torn-up t-shirts around their heads fashioned after bandanas. Finally they were both ready, lying prone on the cold wet floor.

‘You go first,’ the guard on the left suggested. ‘Ten rounds.’

The second guard glanced over at his colleague then took aim at the middle of the wall, aiming at a point about two feet off the floor. 'Cover your ears, buddy.' He released the safety, took the first trigger pressure and fired.

After a long thirty seconds they glanced at each other. 'I think we need better ear defenders!' the guard waiting to fire mentioned, shaking his head. 'Fuck!'

The smoke from the cartridge lingered in the confined space, a covering of dust falling from the roof. The second guard jumped up and ran across to the wall, finding a cone shaped hole ripped out of the old concrete; twelve inches at the surface and narrowing to a finger sized hole through the wall.

If they had known what lay on the other side of the wall they would not have been firing at it. They would have been ten kilometres back, and still running.

3

'What was that?' Thomas asked in a whisper after a startled jump.

'Sounds like they're trying to break through the metal,' Johno calmly commented. 'They should be burning, not blasting.' He stared at the uniform. 'Something here is a bit odd,' he quietly muttered to himself. 'Well, many things in here are a bit odd, but this is even more odd.' He stood and sighed loudly. 'OK, let's keep moving. Might find another way out.'

Lifting the paraffin lamp they walked back outside, into the bar to collect the torches.

'See that,' Thomas shouted, pointing at a dark corner.

'A rat,' Johno said, chuckling at Thomas's discomfort.

'A rat? It was a big as a cat!'

‘Yep, probably was. Might be eating it later. C’mon.’

They walked past the ladies clothes shop a second time before noticing a traditional British ironmongers.

‘This could be useful, all sorts of tools in there,’ Johnno pointed out. Thomas shone his torch inside and at the array of tools and bits of rotten wood stacked against a wall.

Next they found a post office, the notice board fixed to its door catching Johnno’s attention. He stopped and read many of the English notices. ‘This is odd.’

‘What is?’ Thomas focused his torch on the faded paper notices, starting to read the words printed in a strange font. The characters did not seem to be in a straight line.

‘They’re all Second World War, not after.’

‘So?’

‘So, *short-arse*, why are Russians going to build a place like this to train their agents and then put up posters about the war?’

‘Maybe the Germans made this place - and the Russians they took it?’

‘Not a daft as you look, are you?’ Johnno said with a smile. ‘I think you’re right. The Germans made this place *then* the Russians found it when they occupied this country. But that still don’t explain why it’s underground in the Czech Republic. Germans should have put it in Bavaria, not here.’

Another bang echoed through the tunnels, small stones falling from the ceiling and clattering off the concrete floor.

‘They are breaking through!’ Thomas suggested.

‘No, it’ll take a lot longer,’ Johnno calmly suggested, frowning at the wartime notices.

They pressed on, their footsteps echoing around the high cavern, the sound of dripping water getting stronger. Beyond the post office, and hidden from view till now, nestled a small thatch cottage.

Johno smiled. 'Ah, isn't it cute.'

They opened a faded white wooden gate, only knee high, before navigating slowly across a small garden. It had obviously been ornate at some point, complete with dozens of plant pots and garden gnomes.

Johno stopped and knelt, examining a pot closely. 'These are proper plant pots, soil in them with what looks like dead flowers.' He paused.

'So?'

He straightened. 'So what plants do you know that grow in the dark?'

Thomas kicked over the plant pot. 'Silly plants.'

'Yeah,' Johno agreed. 'Silly plants.' Talking towards the plant pots, but pointing with a finger towards the way they came in, he added, 'Go outside and grow like normal plants, huh?'

Johno knocked on the door, causing Thomas to laugh. 'I'm going to huff and puff and blow your house down!'

'The three small pigs!'

'Three *little* pigs.'

Johno put a hooked finger through the ornate iron door handle, turned it and pulled, forcing the door open as it scraped on the doorstep. Odd, he considered, opening outwards. He had to duck his head to enter.

The interior of the cottage was just as he expected; simple wooden chairs, large open fireplace, black pots and pans hanging around the fireplace and the remnants of coal in the fire itself. A round table in the middle of the room offered up another tea set, china teapot and rotten

wooden coasters. The cottage had no second floor and only one large room downstairs.

‘The other buildings had two floors, beds and all,’ Johnno mentioned. ‘This is just one room.’

‘What did the spies learn here?’ Thomas asked.

‘How to live in a English country cottage, have tea with granny ... and how big strapping Aryans should duck a lot when invading cottages in England.’

As they negotiated the small garden fence, by kicking it noisily down, more bangs echoed through the cavern, many small rocks dropping from the ceiling. Opposite the cottage they found a red brick, two-room schoolhouse.

‘We’re late for class,’ Thomas suggested. ‘Teacher will be cross!’

‘*After the sun the rain, after the rain the sun ...* You know it?’

‘What is it?’

‘A hymn, or a song, not sure which. Used to sing it in infants. Kindergarten. Did you sang religious songs in kindergarten?’

Thomas shook his head.

Johnno quietly sang, ‘*After the sun the rain, after the rain the sun ... this is the way of life, ‘til the work be done.*’

They pulled at the heavy front door and wedged it open. Inside they found an area for hanging coats, two classrooms either side of it. The odd thing was that the coat pegs were set too high for children, they had been placed at an adult level.

Johnno forced himself into a very small one-piece desk and chair that seemed to have been chiselled from the same piece of wood. ‘Jesus, it’s a tight fit.’

Thomas slid into one. ‘You are a fat bastard!’

Johno grabbed a twelve-inch ruler off the next desk and rapped Thomas's knuckles. 'Don't cheek your elders, young man. Now sit up and pay attention!'

'Yes, Miss!'

They examined the numerous faded wall posters with their torches. The 'times tables' were listed in sequence.

'That is not English,' Thomas noted, focusing his torch on the blackboard. The white chalk writing was still readable, and German. 'It is German. Old German.'

'Old German?'

'I know some of these words. My grandmother used to say it, but now people do not say these words, only the very old.'

'It's an old complex,' Johno quietly stated.

'Why is this German and everything else English?'

'Good question,' Johno muttered. They read the words. 'It's explaining the money system, I think.'

'Yes,' Thomas confirmed. He opened the lid of his desk, removing a sheet of newspaper. '1934, England.'

'1934?' Johno queried. 'Took a long time to get from England, five years to the war.' He eased out with a loud sigh. 'Never liked school.'

'Otto says you did not go to school!'

'Oh, he did, did he?' Johno muttered as they quit school early today.

'He says you were *made*.'

Johno smiled widely, unseen in the dark as he directed his torch upwards and along the cavern roof. The chamber stretched seventy-five yards along in his estimation, quite a feat of engineering, or maybe it was a natural cave that had been enhanced he considered. Thomas ran to the cottage, grabbed a small pebble from the garden then ran back and smashed a school window.

‘You’ll get sent home from school for doing that!’

They both focused on a large set of wooden doors, large enough to drive a truck through. The doors hosted a man-sized door on the right, which now hung open. Johnno headed towards it.

‘Wait!’ Thomas called.

Johnno spun. ‘What is it?’

‘We must make a wish.’

‘What? What the fuck you on about? It’s just a door!’

‘There!’ Thomas jogged across to the side of the cottage. There they found an old wishing well. ‘It is tradition in your country too?’

‘Yeah,’ Johnno said with a smile. He grabbed some old English coins from his pockets as Thomas dropped his.

They waited, listening. And waited. Finally an angry roar came up the shaft. Thomas jumped back and dropped his torch. Johnno had his pistol out in an instant, aiming at the well. He inched closer, prone on target, and shone his torch down. Nothing. It was all jet black, a slight breeze on his face.

‘It’s a ghost?’ Thomas whispered.

‘No, not a ghost,’ Johnno quietly responded, pistol tight in his hand and his features hardened. He shone his torch around the houses for several seconds then forced a long breath. ‘Wind.’

‘Wind that sounds like a monster,’ Thomas pointed out in a whisper, lifting up his torch.

‘C’mon, let’s get the fuck out of here.’

They stepped through the door, Johnno ducking down, both illustrating the floor ahead with their torch beams.

Johnno straightened. ‘Oh ... shit.’

‘We are making good progress,’ an out-of-breath and now very grimy guard reported to Otto. ‘Maybe soon a hole big enough to crawl through, sir.’

‘Tools will be here in thirty minutes and then cutting equipment maybe twenty minutes after. Carry on.’ The guard ran back inside, his head covered in a makeshift bandana that supported the cloth stuffed into his ears. Otto sat down next to Beesely. ‘We may have a hole to crawl through soon.’

‘Good, good,’ Beesely acknowledged before a series of explosions echoed around the forest. He snapped his head around. ‘What the hell was that?’

‘Explosives. We are clearing a landing pad for the helicopters.’

‘Warn me ... next time,’ he gently scolded as he took another sandwich. ‘So much for the treasure hunt.’

‘It is a minor set-back,’ Otto confidently suggested. ‘Johno will hear the fifty calibres and soon he and Thomas will crawl through the hole. Then we will let the engineers check and make safe first. What can go wrong?’

Beesely turned his head and focused on Otto. ‘Johno... and Thomas ... the kid from hell and his big brother ... in an underground Nazi complex?’

Otto was now worried.

* * *

The two intrepid explorers shone their torches at a pile of skeletons.

Johno whistled. ‘Shit, there must be thirty, forty bodies here.’

The skeletons were all clothed, all wearing shoes, many with rings and wristwatches visible. They lay mostly huddled together in the centre of this new cavern, a few scattered around the edges.

Johnno scanned the area with his torch. ‘They died quickly,’ he quietly stated. ‘This lot didn’t starve to death. There are tools here, enough to dig their way out of that blocked entrance.’ He checked the first body with his torch. ‘So what killed them?’

Thomas glanced at Johnno, now feeling nervous. Unknown to the boy, so was his sponsor.

This new room offered a long central corridor edged by two-storey wooden offices along half its length, stairs up the outsides of them. There were enough offices for maybe a hundred people to work from, in Johnno’s estimation.

He knelt, placing his torch down so that it illuminated the nearest body, and eased off the skeleton’s watch. He turned it over. ‘Russian!’

‘Not Nazi?’ Thomas whispered, closing in.

Johnno stepped quickly to the next body. ‘Check the watches.’ Thomas closed in on the nearest skeleton as Johnno ripped a watch off a detached arm. ‘Russian,’ he muttered to himself.

‘German,’ Thomas informed Johnno.

‘German? Any year?’

‘1939.’

‘Keep looking. And ID badges.’ He grabbed at the pockets of a white lab coat. Inside were papers and a small ID of some kind: faded German writing, 1949. The next was Russian, 1950, then German, 1951.

‘German, 1949,’ Thomas reported. Followed by, ‘Russian, 1951.’

Johno stood, walking to the nearest office and grabbing Thomas by the scruff of the neck as he did, leading the boy quickly away from the bodies and into a wooden office. More skeletons greeted them, many sat at their desks.

‘They died where they sat,’ Johno thought out loud, now breathing heavily. He pushed a slumbering skeleton off the desk with his torch then studied the large technical drawing laid out. Its faded white paper made it hard to discern the detail. Carefully, he blew away - then swept away, a thick layer of dust. Focusing on a part of the diagram his eyes widened. He glared, moving his face closer and bringing his torch to bear.

Thomas noticed, now concerned. ‘What is it?’

‘Something more frightening than a monster in a wishing well.’

‘What?’ Thomas nervously asked.

‘This place - what the Russians were doing here in 1950, or whenever.’ He faced Thomas and took a breath. ‘It’s a nuclear bomb factory!’

3

The hole in the wall was now almost big enough for access, Herr Mole ducking down and shining his torch through. He found five yards of empty floor space leading to a stack of rusted metal shelves hosting a dozen dusty suitcases. Mole directed his torch to the right, finding just a plain wall and no sign of access to the other chamber. Shining his torch the other way revealed just a similar bland grey concrete wall. Upwards he found only chiselled rock. Backing out slowly, a guard lifted him to his feet in one quick movement.

‘Widen this hole with tools, remove the rifles,’ Mole instructed the guards.

‘Is there a way through?’

‘No. Not unless another joining wall is thin enough. This room is isolated from the rest.’ Dejected, the guards cursed at the complex as Mole limped out.

‘Well?’ Beesely urged as Mole appeared, the little man considerably dirtier than when he had entered.

Mole held a hand over his eyes. ‘This room that we have made a hole into is just an annex, not connected to anything else.’

‘Damn it,’ Beesely muttered.

‘What is in this room?’ Otto firmly enquired.

‘Ten or more suitcases - all sealed in.’

‘Suitcases?’ Beesely queried.

‘There is something of great value inside them,’ Mole suggested.

‘What?’ Beesely asked, straightening.

‘We will not know until we go inside,’ Herr Mole pointed out. ‘Someone made a concrete wall to hide them, at great pains to do so.’

‘So, some treasure,’ Beesely quietly stated. ‘But first we have to rescue Johnno and Thomas.’

‘Cutting equipment will be here soon,’ Otto confidently suggested.

‘And then how long?’ Beesely pressed.

Herr Mole stated, ‘The metal plate will take three or four hours at best.’

‘That long?’ Beesely questioned.

‘It is maybe two inches thick.’

‘That will be difficult,’ Otto reluctantly admitted as they sat back down.

‘Well done anyway, Herr Mole,’ Beesely offered. ‘You’re good underground.’ He immediately stopped, raising a pointed finger. ‘I did not mean it to sound ... quite like that.’

* * *

With little else to do, a guard began attacking the edges of the small hole with the old hammer that they had found. A minute later a loud metallic bang echoed around the cavern. Jumping to his feet he walked around the truck as other guards closed in.

Another metallic bang echoed loudly around the chamber, originating from the metal sheet. They inched closer, but approaching the sheet was not easy since the lower half of the caver still lay there. The guard tapped three times with the hammer, someone tapping three times back in response. Then a strange sequence of taps came from the door.

‘What is it?’ a guard asked in a whisper.

‘I know! It’s Morse Code!’ the second guard suggested.

‘What does it say?’

The second guard let his shoulders drop and shot a look at the other man. ‘How the hell should I know? Do *you* know Morse code?’

‘Just SOS,’ the man reluctantly admitted.

‘Go outside and tell them.’

‘Sir,’ the guard called out as he emerged, a little out of breath. ‘Johno is signalling in Morse Code.’

Beesely stood. ‘I used to be good with that. Bit rusty now.’

‘I can translate,’ Herr Mole offered, hobbling quickly towards the entrance.

Beesely watched him go. ‘Ricky used to send the odd message in Morse, just to confound anyone listing in.’

* * *

‘Did they understand?’ Thomas excitedly asked.

‘If they did ... they’d respond in Morse. Beesely should know Morse Code, but he may be a bit, you know, old. Probably forgotten it.’

A series of taps came through the metal, Morse code for ‘RESEND’.

Johno smiled encouragingly at Thomas. He punched the boy gently on the shoulder then started to send the message.

Herr Mole snapped upright.

‘What is it?’ a guard asked, noticing Mole’s puzzled expression.

‘Go and tell Herr Beesely that this facility is a 1950s Russian nuclear bomb factory.’

The guard stared, his head inching closer. Mole focused on the man, starting to nod. The man ran out.

‘Sir! Herr Beesely,’ the guard coughed out, now out of breath. ‘Herr Mole has a ... message ... from Johno.’ They all stood and gathered around the guard. ‘He says ... that this complex ... is a 1950s Russian nuclear bomb factory!’

‘What?’ Otto shouted.

Beesely stared, his mouth hanging open. ‘We ... uh ... we need Geiger counters.’

‘Always in the cars now,’ Otto informed him. He pointed at a guard, the man sprinting down the track.

‘Thank God for Swiss efficiency,’ Beesely let out.

‘Will there still be anything left inside?’ Otto asked.

Beesely made a face. ‘One thing you can be sure of with the Russians - always leave a mess behind. So yes, there may be something in there that’s radioactive. Half their nuclear submarine fleet is rusting in harbours, leaking radiation into the world’s oceans.’

Otto straightened. ‘We will have to tell the Czech authorities.’

Beesely took a deep breath and rubbed his scalp. ‘How do we handle this ... mess?’

‘We own the hotel below, which is not so far. We say that ... we were exploring maybe, some of our staff walked into the cave...’

Beesely lifted his eyebrows. ‘Having spent the night digging out the rubble?’

‘We can remove or hide these rocks, say that there was a small hole that our people went through.’ He beckoned a guard. ‘Start to hide the rubbish pile, make it look old as well.’ The man jogged into the woods, lifting his radio. Otto continued. ‘Then we will say that ... when we knew they were inside and not answering we sent for rescue specialists by helicopter from Zug, not realising it was serious until - maybe two hours after now.’

‘Yes, that might work. Is this forest up for sale? If it’s our land we can do whatever the hell we like on it?’

Otto raised his phone. ‘Find out if the land around the mine is available to buy. If so, buy it. Call me quickly.’

‘Then there’s just the question of the radiation.’

‘If there is any,’ Otto pointed out.

Koch had been listening, the old Czech man not following. 'Sir, I don't think the Russians would trust the Czechs with a bomb factory here, it would be deep inside Russia.'

'That's true,' Beesely agreed. 'It's a puzzle as to why it's here, but if Johnno says it is then he's obviously found something or he wouldn't send out a message like that.'

'What was the name of the small Russian nuclear missile on the lorry,' Otto asked.

'I know what you mean - mobile launchers. But they didn't come into service until the 1970s.'

'The Russians may have wanted a missile close to the German border,' Otto suggested.

'Perhaps, but not in the 1950s. Back then the Russian nukes were the size of a house. They were six or seven years behind the West.'

'What about the suitcases?' Koch asked.

Beesely suddenly stiffened, shocked to his core.

'What is it?' Otto gasped, concerned for him.

'I just remembered something,' Beesely got out, shaking. 'I need to make a call. Otto, start that diplomatic process, I think we are *seriously* in the shit.'

A guard appeared two minutes later with Geiger counters still in their boxes and ducked straight into the tunnel. 'Here!' the man said as he passed one to Herr Mole. They ripped open the boxes, tore apart the plastic covering and threw down the dual Hebrew-English instructions, putting the batteries in the rear.

The guard swung his detector around the room. 'Nothing!' Then at the metal door. 'Nothing!'

Mole popped his Geiger counter through the hole, getting an elevated reading. 'Low levels of radiation.' The

guards glanced at each other as Mole approached the metal door. With the hammer he tapped out a message: 'UNDERSTOOD. ACTION TAKEN. WAIT.'

* * *

Beesely raised his phone. 'Oliver Stanton, please.' He waited.

'Beesely?' came the familiar voice.

'Olly, did I wake you?'

'No, I'm in London, so on your time give or take an hour.'

'Get yourself to Prague, after you push the panic button.'

'What is it?'

Beesely took an audible breath. 'We had a tip-off about a mine in the north east part of the Czech Republic, some local guy suggested that it may have had Nazi gold in it.'

'And?'

'It's a 1950s Russian nuclear installation of some kind.'

'Jesus.'

'We found a dozen suitcases cemented behind an old wall...'

'Christ, you don't think?'

'I bloody well do, old friend.'

'I'll get the State Department to call their President, ready the decon' teams in Germany. Have you notified the local authorities?'

'No.'

'No? Why the hell not?' Oliver barked.

'Johno and the boy are trapped inside.'

‘Inside?’

‘Yes, a trap door came down. I was hoping to extricate them first and be long gone. Be a few more hours until they’re out.’

‘If we wait ... the Czech Government will be seriously pissed,’ Stanton pointedly remarked.

‘I know, that’s my next call. Do what you can in the meantime, I’ll call you back soon.’ He hung up. ‘Operations, put me through to the Czech Interior Minister.’

‘Yes, sir.’

He waited, stepping to the edge of the pleasant green forest.

‘Sir, it’s a Mister Novak.’

‘Hello?’ came a middle-aged man’s voice, heavily accented.

‘Do you speak English, German or French?’

‘English and German, yes. Who is this?’

‘My name is Sir Morris Beesely –’

‘You are English?’

‘Yes, but I am the owner of the International Bank of Zurich, Switzerland.’

‘I know of it,’ came an inquisitive voice.

‘Well, I’m also the director of a security company called K2.’

The Minister paused. ‘Of this I am familiar as well. What can I do for you?’

‘I have just bought a chateau in the village of Bily Potok, near Libere - if I pronounce it correctly.’

‘I understand where it is.’

‘Well, I bought the house and some grounds, we are going to be opening a hotel here.’ He hesitated. ‘Some of

my people went walking in the hills, found a hole in a collapsed cave and went inside.'

'They are trapped?'

'Yes.'

'You will need heavy equipment?'

'Yes. But there is a problem, a very serious problem.'

'They are hurt?'

'One has been killed, but that is not the problem.'

'Not the problem? What are you saying?'

'The people trapped inside have sent message out. They have found a 1950s Russian nuclear bomb assembly complex in the cave.' Beesely waited, kicking mushrooms with his foot. 'We have looked for such a place, but in the south west of our country. I did not believe it existed.'

'I'm afraid it does. I believe your President will be getting a call from the American State Department soon.'

'The American State Department! What for?'

'I would like to bring specialist decontamination experts here from Germany, American experts.'

'That is very kind of you, but this is an internal matter,' came the curt reply.

'May I ask ... how much experience your people have of such matters?'

'It is still an internal matter,' Novak insisted.

'Mr. Novak, people I care very much about are trapped inside. If some action you take, or don't take, results in their deaths ... I will be most displeased ... with you personally.'

The Minister paused. 'Call me back in thirty minutes,' came the unhappy reply.

Johno straightened and turned. 'OK, they got the message. Let's see if we can find a way out, huh?'

They walked slowly back through the obstacle course that was the machine room, past the lathes and cutters and through the door to the 'village'. Navigating around the skeletons they retrieved their ropes and packs. In the village street they scared two large rats with their torches before carefully checking the wishing well again, entering the morbid office area for a second time. At the end of the office area they found another large door, this time metal, with a man-sized door built in. This smaller door stood firmly locked with a hefty padlock.

'This padlock doesn't look like it's from the 1950s,' Johno suggested, a puzzled examination of it.

'Who put it here?'

'Good question, Boy Wonder.'

'Boy Wonder?'

Johno focused on him. 'Batman ... and Boy Wonder.'

'No! Batman and Robin.'

Johno lowered his head and gave it some thought. 'So who was Boy Wonder?'

'Boy Wonder was another name for Robin, stupid.' Thomas forced a smile, before Johno realised that the boy must be getting cold. It was chilly inside, but they had both been reasonably dressed to start with.

Together they shone their torches across the width of the large metal double-door, finding no other way past, the large doors bolted from the other side. Johno peered through a crack, but there was no way of influencing or nudging the large bolt he could see.

He tugged at the padlock. 'We'll need some tools,' he sighed.

'You cannot shoot it?'

‘No, too strong,’ he reluctantly admitted. He dropped his pack and equipment at the door, Thomas copying his mentor’s actions a moment later. ‘We need to check the ironmonger’s for tools.’

Turning around they walked back to where they had left the paraffin lamp, still going strong outside the cottage. Johno turned the wick up a notch and knocked off his torch.

The inside of the hardware shop had the obligatory skeleton on the floor, this one in a military uniform but with no markings or rank insignia. Johno gently nudged it to a corner with his foot as they started to search. A pickaxe looked hopeful, being tossed into the make-believe street with an almighty clatter and echo. A large hammer and a suitable chisel were examined next, also tossed out.

The shop’s shelves offered its visitors hammers and nails, lead pipe in various sizes and a great many tools for carpentry - planes and wood chisels, tins of paint, paintbrushes and some rolls of the thick wallpaper - blackened and rotten.

‘I can’t see any bolt cutters,’ Johno light-heartedly mentioned as he searched. ‘Didn’t really expect to.’

They raided the dusty old till, more English coins and notes pilfered.

With further searching proving fruitless, Thomas diligently lugged the heavy hammer and chisel, balancing his torch under his arm. Johno carried the pickaxe over his shoulder, whistling the theme tune from ‘The Seven Dwarfs’, the tools dumped noisily down next to the metal doors. Johno tugged on the padlock, glanced at the tools, then tugged it again with a curse.

‘Not enough?’ Thomas asked, a little out of breath.

‘Maybe. Let’s check that machine room.’

As they progressed through the office area Johnno noticed a glint in the ceiling. Stood almost directly under the reflected light he switched his torch back on and peered up. ‘That’s an air vent.’ It nestled into the roof, some forty feet up. ‘Hard to see from here.’

‘What’s that?’ Thomas asked.

Johnno inspected the nearest skeleton with torchlight and the area that Thomas now stood illuminating. The skeleton’s clothes were obscuring a tin with faded writing on. He nudged the skeleton away then crouched, rolling the tin toward himself with his torch. He shot upright and backwards, grabbing the boy.

‘What is it?’ Thomas nervously asked.

Johnno’s breathing quickened. He raised his torch back to the roof and the air vent before focussing back on the tin. ‘It’s the reason these people died quickly.’

‘What?’

‘It’s a gas that the Nazis used to kill a lot of people in the war. Someone dropped it down from that hatch. Open, it would seem. It killed everyone in here.’

‘Why did they kill them?’ Thomas asked in a soft voice.

‘Don’t ... know,’ Johnno quietly let out with a sigh. ‘Could be to cover their tracks about what was going on here.’

‘They did not want people to know about the bombs?’

‘Apparently not,’ Johnno quietly stated, a heavy frown creasing his brow. ‘C’mon.’

The machine room was not much help. It housed plenty of heavy cutting machinery, which unfortunately sat fastened to the floor and bolted-in to stop it from vibrating as the lathes were worked. And there was the

small problem of no electricity. A long crowbar offered some hope, Johno lugging it back with them.

He propped it up against the metal door. 'Hungry?'

Thomas nodded, seeming a little ashamed of the weakness he now displayed.

'Cold?'

Again the boy nodded.

Johno retrieved a large swathe of cloth from the dress shop and wrapped it around the boy. 'Better?' Thomas forced a smile. Johno took a deep breath and stepped back, sizing up the large metal doors with hands on hips.

'There are more lamps,' Thomas suggested.

Johno turned his head. 'What?'

'In the shop, many lamps on the wall.'

'Really? Good. You want to get them?'

Thomas hesitated, before bravely walking forwards. Johno smiled widely and joined him. Soon they had three lamps going, illuminating all sides of the metal doors as Johno tried the crowbar. It was too wide to get inside the ring of the padlock, no leverage against the door. He tried hitting the padlock, but with no effect. Next came the hammer and chisel. Johno made a determined effort for ten minutes, working up a sweat, but the padlock was not budging.

'It is too strong,' Thomas reluctantly admitted.

Johno rolled his eyes. He stepped back and put his hands on his hips again, studying the problem.

'You can make a bomb!' Thomas suggested.

'Bomb?'

'To blow up the doors!'

'From what, exactly?' Johno testily enquired.

'In the shop. Tins and bottles.'

‘Yeah, of paraffin and paint and paint cleaner. They burn slowly, they don’t explode too well.’ Thomas looked dejected, which Johno now noticed. ‘But that’s a good idea, there may be something around here we can use to make a bomb.’ He pointed. ‘The chemicals we need are probably on the other side of this door.’

Thomas laughed, his sponsor giving him an encouraging smile through the gloom.

Ambling up to the edges of the metal door Johno folded his arms, thinking. He kicked the edge of the concrete wall where it enclosed and supported the door’s hinges, a small chunk of concrete falling away. ‘Thomas. Hammer, please.’

Thomas laboured across with the heavy hammer.

Johno pointed with his foot. ‘Hit that, there’s a good lad.’ He stood back.

Thomas swung the hammer as if he was striking a ball with a cricket bat, a large chunk of concrete falling away. ‘Look!’ he shouted.

‘It’s very old and damp concrete. Swing away, young man. Knock that ball out the grounds.’

Thomas attacked the wall. A minute later his arms were tired, but the wall was revealing a rusty hinge.

‘Warmer?’ Johno asked with a knowing smile.

Thomas smiled back and threw off the cloth as Johno lifted the crowbar. At the opposite end of the metal doors Johno jabbed at the lower hinges, soon making a large hole. The sounds of their earnest combined efforts echoed loudly around the cavern, scaring the rats.

From far behind a pair of eyes watched their efforts from the shadows.

Mole tunnels

1

Herr Mole eased through the hole. After all, he was only one who could. Inside he straightened-up awkwardly, picked up his torch and determinedly investigated the small room, confirming that all sides of the room were simply smooth concrete.

The small hammer was passed through to him. He reached down and grabbed it before limping to the wall closest to the metal plate, the wall that Johnno and Thomas were stuck behind. Tapping the wall, he moved along its length investigating high and low as far as he could reach, finding the wall solid. He knelt awkwardly, and painfully, and tapped the floor in several places, finding it solid. Then the far wall, facing the forest; again solid.

Finally he tossed the hammer towards the entrance and focused on the suitcases. There were twelve, enough space on these old metal shelves for perhaps fifteen. A single case rested open, stuffed full of newspapers. With his torch held close he slowly lifted the lid of the first closed case and peered inside.

* * *

As Beesely watched, the blast knocked the guard closest to the entrance off his feet. Beesely closed his eyes and spun just as the blast hit him, knocking him to the ground.

Dust bellowed from the entrance as Otto jumped down and covered Beesely with his body. After a moment, when no further blast or danger presented itself and silence recaptured the forest clearing, he clambered up and lifted

Beesely, both now covered in grey dust. 'You are OK?' Otto got out in a panic.

'Yes, I think so,' Beesely coughed out.

'To the road!' Otto shouted, guards closing in and helping Beesely down the path, Koch following with the old Czech man, both coughing as they dusted themselves down.

Otto rushed to the entrance as a guard emerged, the man now covered in dust and bleeding from his nose and ears, trickles of blackened blood across grey skin. 'What happened?'

'Herr Mole ... in room ... dead.' The man collapsed, grabbed by another guard as the sound of helicopters suddenly grew.

'Evacuate to the helicopter! Carry him!' Beesely ordered.

Otto grabbed a torch and ventured inside bent double. Just past the first door he checked the skeleton, cursing when he realised, then bumped into a guard as the man fumbled along, the man's eyes tightly shut.

'Here!' he shouted, grabbing the dazed man and dragging him towards the entrance, crunching irreverently over the skeleton. At the entrance he threw the man unceremoniously onto the damp grass before turning and rushing back in. At the end of the tunnel he started to choke and cough, noticing now the delicate beams of light fighting their way through the dust. He dropped to his knees and crawled.

'Anyone here?'

He heard a cough and a moan. Crawling quickly forwards on his hands and knees he discarded the torch, it was just about useless. A whimpering caught his attention, just off to his right. Crawling painfully on the hard

concrete floor, now covered in small rocks, he knelt on someone's hand. He felt with his hands across the rubble and found a warm body, immediately starting to drag the man towards the dull grey blur that was the entrance.

* * *

‘What was that?’ Thomas asked as he spun around.

The pair of eyes watching them was also startled and retreated as the thunderous noise reverberated around the cavern, dislodging large amounts of dust and small rocks. They both put hands on top of their heads as the stones rained down.

‘Sounds like they’re using explosives, silly sods. Guess they’re keen to rescue us.’ Without Thomas noticing he frowned his concern along the passage. ‘Just hope the idiots don’t bring the whole damn entrance down.’

‘We can go out this way,’ Thomas insisted, taking another motivated swing at the wall.

Johnno inspected his little helper's work. ‘That’s enough down there, try up here.’ He tapped a part of the concrete around Thomas’ head height, where he could see the hinge enter the wall.

Thomas lifted the heavy hammer over his shoulder, breathing hard, a glint of sweat on his face. He took a step forwards and pushed, rather than swung the hammer, smashing a piece of concrete off. The hammer fell to the floor, too heavy for him to control.

‘Careful!’ Johnno snapped. Then quieter, ‘We can’t risk you getting an injury, not in here. Go to the shop and get yourself a smaller hammer, I saw some.’

Thomas turned and stepped away from the doors, fetching up his torch. With his face now covered in sweat

he felt noticeably chilled as soon as he started walking. Navigating around the skeletons in the office section took only a short time before he stepped through the small door to the blackened village.

Johno took a deep lungful of damp air then attacked the concrete with the long crowbar. The eyes closed in quickly, but silently. Johno jabbed at the wall, loud echoes of his labour reassuring the lad of his mentor's presence.

Thomas walked nervously past the wishing well, checking it carefully. Noticing a pebble next to the cottage's ornate fence he picked it up and slowly stepped up to the well. The eyes narrowed, watching him from the shadows.

Thomas inched closer to the well, listening carefully. He reached out with the pebble over the side of the well and let it drop. It clattered against the sides, the sound of stone on stone drifting up, distorted in echo. Then nothing. He listened. Ten seconds passed. Nothing, no bang or clatter.

'Stupid ghost!' he quietly cursed, turning for the shop.

The eyes followed five yards back, closing the distance.

In the shop Thomas found a hammer at the rear. It was too small, so he tossed it over his shoulder. The clatter halted the eyes at the doorway, backing up a few steps.

Thomas tried another hammer, weighing it up, but a sound caused him to lower it to a shelf. Without turning around he reached into his jacket and withdrew his 9mm Walther PPK. Stood silent, frozen to the spot, he thought he could hear breathing. He gripped the pistol tightly and pulled the hammer back. There was already a round in the chamber, but he always carried it as Johno had taught him, hammer down.

The click caused a reaction behind him, a slight scratching sound. The eyes were close now, very close.

Thomas spun, torch and pistol ready, then gasped. He couldn't speak.

* * *

By time Otto had dragged the semi-conscious guard out through the tunnel he was losing consciousness himself. The cool fresh air was helping, but he let the guard flop and dropped to his knees himself, gasping for breath.

Another guard grabbed him by the arms and lifted him upright, a splash of water on his face a moment later. They sat him upright.

'Drink!' someone shouted.

Water was poured into his mouth, whether he wanted some or not. He spat it back out, clearing the dust and coughing. More water splashed onto his eyes, yet more again into his mouth. Blinking rapidly he let the water wash across his eyes, clearing out the dust. He spat out the water then swallowed some.

'I'm OK,' he managed to cough out. With his eyes closed firmly shut he got lifted to his feet, his arms quickly placed across two broad shoulders as he was led away down to the track.

2

'C'mon,' Thomas called.

Johno thought he heard voices and dropped the crowbar with a clatter. He took a few steps and lifted his torch, turning it on. There came Thomas, talking to himself. 'Found it?' Johno shouted.

‘Yes,’ came back the reply. ‘And the ghost!’

Johno had turned back to the doors, but spun and faced Thomas. ‘Ghost?’

‘C’mon,’ Thomas was encouraging.

Johno tried to picture the boy encouraging the ghost along as if it was a dog. He stepped closer. Then Thomas shone his torch at the baby bear as it cried out.

‘Jesus!’ Johno jumped back, before composing himself. He laughed loudly. ‘Where’d you find that?’

‘It was in the shop, and I think it was in the wishing well before, same sound.’

Johno checked behind the bear. ‘Just hope the fucker’s mum and dad aren’t around here anyplace!’

‘It’s a European Brown Bear, they don’t grow big,’ Thomas lied.

‘How big?’ Johno pressed.

‘Like a dog,’ Thomas lied, encouraging the bear along. ‘I’m going to keep him.’

‘Like fuck you are!’

‘Why not!’ Thomas protested, his plea echoing.

‘Because first we’ve got to get out of *weird nuclear bomb factory* - alive! And right now that bear is looking a lot like a good sized steak.’

‘No!’ Thomas protested. ‘We cannot eat him.’

Johno produced a half eaten Mars bar, knelt down and unwrapped it. The bear smelt it almost immediately and cried out loudly, grabbing it quickly and wolfing it down.

‘Hey, I could have eaten that!’ Thomas complained.

Johno stroked the bear cub and stood, smiling. ‘Well, now we just fatten up the steak a bit more.’

‘No!’ Thomas repeated. ‘We will be rescued quickly, then he will fly home with us.’

Johno laughed and returned to the wall. 'Can't wait to see Otto's face when that *thing* starts shitting in the command centre.'

'Maybe he knows the way out.'

'Why don't you ask him?' Johno hit the wall.

'*He* got in, so he knows the way out.'

'*He* ... is six inches across, I'm not!' Johno hit the wall again. 'This will take an hour, then we are on the other side.'

Thomas patted the bear before attacking the higher hinge with renewed vigour, rapid small chips.

'Watch your eyes,' Johno cautioned. 'Stand as far back as you can.'

Thirty minutes later they were both sweating and paused their efforts, needing a drink. Thomas and his new little assistant went back to the house and fetched back the old milk bottle, now full of tap water. Upon his return they both drank, the water palatable - cold and fresh.

'The water must come from a spring,' Johno suggested as he rested, breathing loudly. 'Underground.' He turned and studied the large metal doors. 'Going to need something to stand on, next hinge is too high up.'

'Chairs?' Thomas suggested.

'Nope, going to need to be a bit higher than that.' He lifted the crowbar and turned. 'Bring a lamp.'

The bear had been lying down, but now forced itself slowly up and followed closely.

'The poor little *steak* is starving,' Johno commented. 'Must have been living off rats. Could have been here for weeks, but it hardly looks weaned.'

Johno surveyed a wooden staircase through the grey half-light. It provided access to a second floor office and appeared both thin and dangerous to walk up. Jamming the

crowbar into a gap against the wooden office building he levered hard and snapped a fastening. The next two fastenings went easily and the leg supporting the top of the steps went with an almighty swing of the crowbar.

The landing stood eight feet high, running around the outside of the second floor offices and reminded Johnno of a cowboy saloon. He cautiously climbed the loose stairs, testing the resistance of each one before proceeding to the next step. Where they fitted into the landing he broke off the fastenings.

‘Stand back!’

Stood on the landing he noted the second set of stairs, at the far end, before forcing off the remaining set of fastenings. All that held the stairs in place now was the wooden structure itself and some dovetailed joints. Jabbing down at the dovetails with the sharp end of the crowbar split the old wood easily.

‘Move the frigging bear back, or it’ll be steak sooner... rather than later.’

Thomas walked backwards and encouraged the bear, letting the cub lick his hand. Johnno lifted the crowbar and smashed it down onto the stair railings. They gave, and it slid down to a flat ladder shape on the floor with a loud echoing clatter.

‘Drag it to the doors!’

Johnno made his way cautiously along the landing, popping his head into the first office. Through the dim lamplight he could make out desks and what appeared to be drawing tables propped at an angle. The landing creaked as he walked along, one hand hovering over the banister just in case.

Soon he was helping Thomas drag the newly fashioned ladder noisily along the damp floor the short distance to

the metal doors. They jammed it up against the right most edge of the metal doors, a ridge on the doors helping to secure it, Johnno kicking it in so that it was wedged tight. He climbed the steps and started to jab the concrete, but this time not so hard lest he land on his face when the ladder slipped.

It did slip, twice, and both times he rode it down, breaking a rung. Finally they jammed it in against a higher ridge, the ladder now angled at about eighty degrees.

After thirty minutes of hard work Johnno was feeling the effects, the sweat chilling quickly. He came down, letting the crowbar fall and frighten the cub before taking a drink.

‘It is difficult,’ Thomas commented. He had been hammering the lower hinges that Johnno had already exposed.

Johnno took a long breath. ‘Yep. But soon be there,’ he encouraged.

A sudden creak caused them both to jump. Johnno grabbed Thomas, both running clear of the doors. They waited in silence for a minute.

Johnno glanced at the metal doors. The top hinges were still in place, so there was no chance of it falling on them. But the metallic creaks grew louder. Thomas stood back, both of them edging further away, beyond where they estimated the doors may fall. Their equipment sat off to one side, so no problem if it did fall.

The doors creaked a final time before the lower hinges cracked and catapulted masonry towards them, the bear jumping on one piece with two oversized paws and smelling it. The top middle of the doors fell away from them, the two lower corners buckling inwards, both sections moving around four foot before sticking.

‘Handy,’ Johno commented.

Thomas grabbed his torch and rushed across, lying down and peering through. ‘It’s a tank!’

‘Tank of what?’ Johno asked as he eased down.

‘Army tank.’

Frowning strongly, Johno shone his torch through. A Sherman tank sat staring back at him; US Army, Second World War. ‘Fuck me.’

They quickly grabbed all of their equipment and shoved it through, easing past the doors and straightening up. The bear followed, sticking close to the new source of sticky food.

The tank stood proud, albeit in need of a good wash. Its green paint was still visible, its turret gun pointing directly towards them, angled down.

‘Don’t ... jump on it,’ Johno quietly, yet forcefully told Thomas. ‘We can’t afford any injuries in here.’ Shining his torch off to the right he was surprised to find numerous oil paintings hung on the walls.

‘They are good money?’ Thomas excitedly asked.

‘Doubt it, or they wouldn’t be left here. After all this time in the damp they’ll be ruined.’

Below the paintings they noticed many old tea boxes, a few sturdy looking wooden boxes stood next to them and interlaced as if giant Lego pieces. In the far right corner rested part of the tail fin of a Second World War German aircraft.

‘Quite the collection,’ Johno muttered.

To the left of the tank they noticed what appeared to be a submarine’s torpedo. They walked past the front of tank to get a better look, focusing their torches. The ‘torpedo’ sat propped up horizontal, about four feet off the floor and was not a torpedo but a mini-sub.

‘Shit,’ Johno let out. ‘Now that ... is good money!’

‘It’s a torpedo?’

‘No, it’s a submarine for just one person. A *mini-sub*.’

They approached and inspected it. Johno pointed and said,

‘The scuba-diver sat there and controlled it.’

‘What for?’

‘The British took them to Norway on submarines, then dropped them into the water around the corner from a big German battleship that was protected by nets. They cut the nets and went through, up to the ships and put bombs on the hull under the water - blow them up and sink them - forerunners to the Special Boat Service, SBS, like I told you about. It was the Japanese who used to ram them into American ships.’

‘Why is it good money?’

‘Very, very rare. I don’t think they ever recovered a German one in good condition.’ He caressed its cold metal as they inched along its length. Above it hung an American Army motorcycle, a dispatch riders’ bike. ‘Quite the collection,’ he repeated.

Next they discovered a small forest of tall brass shells for the Sherman, all stood on their bases.

‘Don’t touch. Dangerous.’

‘We can use the tank to make a hole!’

Johno slapped him on the head.

‘What?’ Thomas protested.

‘That ammo’ is sixty years old. And that tank barrel is just as old, *and* rusty. Stick that shell in that tank and kiss your arse goodbye. Boom!’ He pushed the boy onwards.

They noted more wooden boxes, more tea boxes - some with silver ornaments in - then many more boxes of assorted sizes dotted along the side of the large room.

They found helmets pinned to the walls, old rifles and very old flintlocks.

‘Shit, almost forgot.’ Johno fumbled through his pockets and pulled out a small silver digital camera and switched it on. When the green light appeared he flashed a shot of the tank with Thomas standing proudly in view.

Behind the tank stood a half-track, again US Army, and with an anti-tank recoilless-rifle on the back. The driver’s door rested open and they both took a moment to peer inside. Next in line came a US Army jeep, Thomas jumping in and trying the steering wheel as Johno examined the old radio in the back.

Beyond the jeep rested an imposing German half-track, which Thomas climbed up into. What caught Johno’s attention where the racks of anti-tank weapons propped-up next to it, the German equivalent of a modern day RPG; he counted dozens of them.

‘Thomas, careful here. Explosives.’

Thomas jumped down. ‘They have been ... made not to explode.’

‘*Made safe*,’ Johno corrected him. ‘No, I don’t think so, I think this lot is the original stuff.’

They sloshed through a quarter inch of water, the bear cub shaking its paws as it followed. Another large set of metal doors greeted them.

Johno let out a deep sigh and stepped towards the small hatch, a shaft of light catching his eye. He spun around and looked up. It was just a vent, but at least the surface was somewhere up there. He turned back to the hatch.

Thomas tugged at the padlock, staring at Johno. ‘I’m tired. Can’t we use the tank?’

Johno coughed out a short laugh. 'If we could, I would,' he said as he examined the padlock. It was just the same as the previous one, so he examined the hinges. They looked exactly the same, if not in poorer condition. 'First, we go back to where we came in and signal them we're OK.'

He led the way, the three intrepid explorers reducing in height down the line. Back past all the military memorabilia, under the broken doors, through the office block and its pile of skeletons, through the small door and then slowly through the village - still quite amazed by its surreal appearance, through the machine room then to the metal plate trapping them in.

'There is more dust!' Thomas pointed out.

'A lot more. Caused by those silly sods using explosives.'

They both coughed as they finally reached the metal plate and the top half of the K2 cave expert, the bear cub starting to lick the blood off the dead man's face.

'Hey! Get him back, he ain't eating that guy!'

Thomas dragged the protesting bear away as Johno banged on the solid metal plate with Thomas's small hammer, the reverberations echoing loudly around the room. He waited, no response forthcoming.

He banged again, harder, six loud whacks at the plate, before waiting a full minute, listening with his ear to the cold metal. Again nothing.

He banged a third time, this time his arm motivated with some anger. The echoes were loud, the cub protesting its discomfort with a cry. They waited, noting only silence, punctuated with drips of water coming from the dark shadows.

'What is wrong?' Thomas asked.

‘They ... may have accidentally blocked the tunnel,’ Johnno quietly admitted. ‘We may have to go around the other way.’

‘The bear knows the way out,’ Thomas suggested.

‘Shut up about the fucking bear!’ Johnno snapped. He took a long breath and calmed himself. ‘This is serious, we could be here a while.’

Stood staring at his young charge he could feel the chill growing, the sweat in his hair and on his inner clothing rapidly cooling. Their clothes were also damp, wet in places and collecting dirt. He had not noticed the temperature so much earlier, what with the excitement of discovery and the work of attacking the doors. Now he realised that they both needed a warm ‘cuppa’.

He put a sympathetic hand on the boy’s shoulder. ‘C’mon, let me show you what survival training is all about.’

‘Yes!’ Thomas enthused. ‘The tank.’

They plodded slowly back. At the clothes shop they popped in and dug out moderately clean cloth from the middle of a pile that lay neatly stacked up.

Johnno turned the female mannequins around, curiously observed by his young charge. ‘Wipe your armpits, balls and arse,’ he suggested. ‘Got to get the cold sweat off.’ In the flickering light he took off his jacket and unbuttoned his shirt, immediately feeling the chill. He dropped his trousers, Thomas copying his every move. They wiped in unison, rubbing their faces and hair as if they had just got out of the shower.

‘Better?’

Thomas nodded.

‘Grab some clean cloth, tear it, make a scarf and some head gear, like you see a lady wearing.’

‘Errr,’ the boy protested with a smile.

‘Hey, there’s only us and the walking steak in here, no one to see you, so stay warm. I’ll be doing it later.’

‘Do you think there is food here?’ the boy asked as he made a scarf from white cotton.

‘There may be some old tins, but can’t risk it, it’ll make you sick. We’ve got the guns and there’re plenty of juicy rats!’

‘Rats! Errrr.’

‘Hey, SAS soldiers learn to catch and eat rats?’ he said, his head tipped and eyebrows up.

Thomas studied him for a moment, giving it some thought. ‘Teach me then.’

‘That’s the boy. Trooper in the making.’ He messed up his young charge’s hair before helping the lad to fix a bandana. ‘Very pretty!’

‘Vanker!’ They laughed.

Back in the memorabilia room the adult lead the child around as with any other father-son group at a military museum anywhere in the world. Johno pointed out many things of interest, named numerous bits of equipment - describing their use and history as well as interesting facts about many items. He was also deliberately keeping the boy’s mind off their current situation.

The recoilless rifle on the half-track offered a possibility, he guessed that some of the shells might still work. The tank was not an option, the batteries would be dead and the diesel a muddy glue at the bottom of its fuel tank after all this time.

Then Johno suddenly stopped. ‘Shit!’

‘What is it?’ Thomas whispered, closing in on a wooden crate.

‘Tins of black powder.’

‘Like firework powder?’

‘Just like it.’

‘Can you make a bomb?’

Johno turned and grinned, a knowing look. Thomas brightened until his face appeared it would light the dark chamber. With his Swiss Army knife Johno prised the lid off a tin. ‘Excellent.’

‘What is?’

‘The paper seal is in place, so it’s all nice and dry.’ He carefully sliced the paper down the middle and ripped it off like the seal on fresh jar of coffee. Lifting a small handful of powder he let it filter through his fingers. ‘Dry. Good.’ Placing the lid back on he put the tin to one side. ‘I noticed some sandbags.’

‘There,’ Thomas pointed.

They moved the lamps, finding two-dozen damp sandbags piled up against the wall, Thomas trying – and failing - to lift one.

‘They’re full of water,’ Johno said with a smile as he helped. ‘Which is exactly what we need.’ Thomas met his gaze, a slight frown. ‘If they didn’t have water, I would have made them wet. Better for when the bomb goes off.’

He dragged the sandbag towards the door. ‘I’ll do this, you go and look around for a metal case, maybe two or three litres inside, but strong metal - maybe five millimetres - with a lid or screw top.’

Thomas snapped his fingers at ‘Steak’ and they went off hunting with his torch. Johno placed a lamp on the top of the German half-track, providing a dull grey light around the bottom quarter of the cavernous room. He threw off his jacket, took a long sigh at the pile of sandbags then started dragging them one at a time towards the smaller hatch of the metal doors.

‘Johno!’ echoed through the blackness ten minutes later.

Johno stopped and wiped his face, the boy’s call a welcome distraction. Breathing heavily he walked towards the lad, his knee aching from the cold and damp. ‘What’s up, short-arse?’

‘What about this?’ Thomas asked, shining his torch.

‘Your torch batteries are going,’ Johno noted. ‘Use a lamp from now on.’ He inspected the metal box. It measured twelve inches square, thick walled and with a flip lid that secured strongly with a pressure clip.

‘Yeah, might work. I’ll take this, you keep looking, another ten minutes.’ He turned then stopped. ‘Oh, pop to that shop with the tools, I want a small thin chisel or large nail.’

‘Here, large nails, I saw them.’

They moved along the wall and Thomas ducked down, pulling out a rusted paint-tin full of ten-inch nails.

Johno inspected one. ‘Yeah, good. Fetch your hammer.’

He slumped down onto the fresh mound of sandbags and put the box between his feet, Thomas handing him the hammer. Holding the nail in place on the side of the box Johno hit it three times, puncturing the metal and making a small hole, wiggling the nail to make the hole a little larger ‘And what’s this for?’

‘For the fooze?’ Thomas ventured.

‘Good lad. But we don’t have a decent fuse, although I’m sure that there’s probably loads of it here ... someplace.’

In the gloomy grey light he examined the box carefully before placing it between the sandbags and the door, a snug fit. Thomas fetched the black powder and Johno let

him slowly pour it into the metal case until three quarters full. They carefully closed the lid together, locked the pressure clip, Johno directing Thomas on exactly where to pour a trail of powder as a fuse, the line snaking away from the door and skirting around the damp and wet areas.

As Thomas slowly prepared the fuse line, tasted and firmly rejected by 'Steak', his mentor lifted heavy damp sandbags onto the tin and packed them in tightly, one on top of the other. Finally, a heavy mound of sandbags surrounded the bomb, a small gap left where the powder trail snaked along.

Fatigued, Johno put the last heavy sandbag on top. 'That should do it,' he got out between laboured breaths. With his torch he studied the fuse line of powder, hard to see in the poor light, black powder on a black floor. 'That's only about ten seconds, black powder will *whoosh* along.'

'Can I light it?' Thomas urged.

'Sure. Wait 'til I am back near where we came in though. I'll take the bear.'

'What? No, wait - you light it.' Thomas picked up the protesting 'Steak' and headed for the door, ducking quickly under it, leaving the amused master bomb-maker with the task.

At a leisurely pace Johno retrieved the spare lamp and their equipment and shoved it through the hole under the door. Returning with just a lamp he extended the fuse line as best he could with a thin trail, using all the remaining black powder from the tin. He tore off a piece of paper-label from a wooden crate and lit it with his lighter. Checking the room and taking a breath he let it fall.

Whoosh! He ran.

Four seconds and he reached the broken door, ducking down and scrambling quickly through, lamp in hand. Standing, he jumped to the side and found Thomas and 'Steak' cowering. When he put his hands over his ears Thomas let go of 'Steak' and copied, the bear wriggling free and running off towards the village.

'Does he know something we don't?' Johno shouted.

A moment later the pressure wave hit them. They both fell to the left, Johno on top of Thomas.

'Shit!' Johno let out, trying to right himself, his ears ringing. He shook it off, quickly grabbing his torch and glancing through the opening. Thomas scrambled across and joined him, coughing away dust.

A loud clatter echoed through the memorabilia chamber, followed by the sound of breaking glass, a lot of breaking glass. A short period of silence was followed by a loud metallic thud, followed by something smashing, followed by the sounds of more glass breaking.

They glanced at each other as if they were two naughty schoolboys. Another smash echoed down the chamber, something rolling around on concrete. They glanced at each other again.

'Oops,' Johno let out.

'What happened?'

'Sounds like that next room was well packed with ... stuff.'

'Valuable stuff?'

'Not any more,' Johno whispered as they crawled through.

'C'mon, boy,' Thomas called into the dark.

Johno grabbed his arm and dragged him quickly through and upright. 'The sodding bear can look after himself, he's done so up to now.'

They walked on, their lamps not much use in the smoke and dust. Coughing hard, they waved hands in front of their faces, causing visible swirls the dust hung so thick. Sandbags were strewn across the floor and ripped open, a damp layer of sand covering everything, an inch thick near the door.

Reaching the doors they could see that the metal box had gone, a hole now under the metal door, a twelve-inch gap to crawl through. Something in the next room fell and smashed.

‘I got a bad feeling,’ Johno muttered.

‘You broke it all,’ Thomas pointed out, clearly shifting the blame to the only adult present.

‘Sneak,’ Johno muttered as he ducked through the hole. Thomas followed. They scrambled to their feet and stared ahead, less dust and smoke on this side of the door. Johno surveyed the scene. ‘Oh dear.’

4

A guard emerged from the wooded trail and ran onto the gravel road, finding Beesely and Otto sat in the Range Rovers, all the doors open on this warm and pleasant day. He ran over to Otto, who now sat in the front seat. ‘Radiation, sir. At the end of the tunnel.’

‘No sign of Herr Mole?’ Otto quietly asked, his head lowered and covered in wet streaks of grey dust.

The guard shook his head. ‘He was in the small room when the bomb went off.’

‘OK, move the equipment back,’ Otto suggested. ‘Two hundred metres perimeter.’

A helicopter lifted off unseen as four K2 men came running through the woods from the cleared landing area.

‘Sir, where do you want us?’

‘Help move the equipment back to the road,’ Otto quietly ordered, squinting against the bright sunlight. He pointed. ‘Follow that path.’ The new arrivals ran quickly across the road and disappeared into the woods.

Beesely raised his phone. ‘Oliver Stanton.’

‘Beesely? What news?’

‘Confirmed radioactive, I’m afraid.’

‘Jesus.’ Stanton could be heard breathing. ‘OK, I’m sending you a couple of Chinooks, one hour. We got clearance, Czechs were already in a flap.’

‘I had a word.’

‘That’s the effect you have on people!’

‘Do you think the Russians would co-operate, send someone who might actually know about this place?’

‘At the moment relations are not so hot, as you can imagine. But if the Czechs asked ... maybe.’

‘You coming over?’

‘Someone has to keep an eye on you.’

‘See you when you get here then.’ Beesely hung up.

‘What about heavy equipment?’ Otto pressed.

‘My next call. Operations, Mr. Novak, Czech Minister.’ He waited.

‘Hello, Mister Beesely?’ came the Czech Minister.

‘Yes. May I enquire about heavy digging equipment?’

‘It is on its way. Our police and army will be with you shortly as well. There will be a three-kilometre exclusion zone, followed by a ten-kilometre zone. Water sources nearby will be monitored and local villagers removed.’

‘That seems very thorough, Mr. Novak.’

‘The American Army is sending decontamination teams and bomb disposal teams.’

‘Yes, I requested it,’ Beesely pointed out.

‘You ... requested it?’

‘I am far more important than you realise, Mr. Novak.’

‘Of that I am now sure. I am starting to realise many things.’

Beesely took a moment to think. ‘My bank will be paying for all costs associated with the clean up and bomb disposal and compensating local villagers.’

‘That is ... very good of you. But why?’

‘We bought the hotel, found the mine ... it was our fault that you must now move these people.’

‘You have a very strange way of looking at things, Mr. Beesely,’ Novak commented.

‘Will you be travelling here?’

‘Yes, I shall be leaving in five minutes.’

‘Are there any good hotels nearby?’ Beesely enquired.

‘There is a Health Spa some ten kilometres from you, on the road to Libere. In fact, just south of the town.’

‘What’s it called?’

‘I will find out,’ Novak offered.

‘No, no problem, we’ll find it. Any of your staff can stay there - we will be paying. Oh, more little thing. Do you think you could call the Russian Defence Minister?’

‘Russians? Why?’

‘The Russians may know what’s down in the cave, how to access it.’

‘Given what this place is, I do not think they will help,’ Novak pointed out.

‘Still, you can at least try. In fact, while I think of it, there are skeletons in the cave –’

‘Skeletons? You mean bodies?’

‘Yes, dating back to 1950, maybe earlier. I think the Russians may want to recover them.’

‘I have not heard of them doing this before,’ Novak commented.

‘Could you ... at least, send the message.’

‘I will discuss it with the Minister for Foreign Affairs. I will see you in one hour.’

Beesely cut the call then pressed green. ‘Operations? Were you listening?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Right, buy that Spa, compensate anyone there then throw them out. Get our people in, we will use it tonight, Chateau is a little breezy. Oh, notify Oliver Stanton of its name and location as our HQ.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Get me Minister Blaum, please.’ He waited, glancing at the equipment being loaded up.

‘Beesely, how are you doing?’ came a loud and cheerful Minister Blaum.

‘Are you sitting down?’

‘Oh hell.’

‘Could you possibly come to the Czech Republic ... and meet us with the Swiss Ambassador?’

‘What’s happened?’

‘Well, not our fault –’

‘It never is, but you still manage to find trouble!’

‘Quite. Well, we bought a hotel here, to do it up and make a Spa out of it -’

‘Sounds straight forward enough so far,’ Blaum quietly commented.

‘Then we discovered a cave on the hill behind the hotel.’

‘And in the cave?’ Blaum pressed.

‘A 1950s Russian nuclear bomb factory.’

‘Beesely!’ he screamed. ‘How can you go to buy a hotel and *find* a nuclear bomb factory? You knew it was there!’

‘No, Minister, I can assure you we did not. We thought the cave had Nazi gold.’

‘Nazi gold?’ came the softer enquiry.

‘It may well have been a German Army installation during the war, taken over by the Russians after. And then made into a bomb factory.’

‘What do you need us for? Just tell the Czech authorities.’

‘We have done and they are on they way - in force by the sounds of it, so is the American Army.’

‘Beesely ... what else is going on?’

‘Johnno and Thomas are trapped inside the cave, no way out.’

‘I am on my way.’ Blaum hung up.

‘That’s what I like, a man of action,’ Beesely muttered.

From the front seat Otto turned his head. ‘We must tell Ricky’s pregnant woman.’

‘Christ, yes.’ Beesely rubbed his eyes. ‘She’s lost both of them now, both our fault.’ He peered out the window. ‘Christ. Do you know where she is?’

‘Yes, Zug is a small town and they were seen many times. She is very tall, Herr Mole was very short - an odd couple.’

Beesely breathed out loudly. ‘Send someone, a woman, see if we can be any help. But don’t force any help, as Ricky requested.’

‘What about the Russians? You think they will help?’

‘Normally, not a chance. But there are ways and means.’ He raised his phone. ‘Operations?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Tip off some Russian newspapers that the remains of Russian soldiers, dating to 1950, have been found in the Czech Republic and that the Czech authorities are *refusing* to hand them back. They will be buried in unmarked and untended graves. Oh, contact Duncan in London, same story.’ He hung up.

Otto turned his head fully around. ‘What will that do?’

‘Reverse psychology. The Russian public will go mad, demand their return and send some representatives. We’ll explain that we cannot recover the bodies because of the radiation, and would they mind awfully helping us out.’

‘Le fox!’

‘Sad thing is that Stalin murdered millions of his own people, no one ever really tried to identify them all. These days it’s a different story, so the modern Russians may want to give a damn. Anyway, before the Czechs get here we’d better get you cleaned up ... or they won’t believe you’re Swiss!’

5

Batman and Boy Wonder surveyed the room, its contents, and the damage they had done.

‘I’m telling on you!’ Thomas quietly suggested, staring wide-eyed.

‘And I’ll cook your fucking bear!’

Thomas knelt and faced the hole. ‘C’mon, boy. Bear, where are you?’

Johno lifted him by the collar. ‘First problems first, like getting out of here.’ They stepped further into the room.

‘What is this?’ Thomas asked, pointing at glass strewn across the floor.

‘What it *was* ... was a chandelier. In fact, about fifty of them. Looks like they were hung on these metal frames.’

‘Good money?’

‘Oh, yes, especially if they were old and original.’

‘You broke them.’

Johno clipped the boy’s head. ‘*We* ... broke them. Don’t tell grandpa Beesely.’

Thomas laughed. ‘What are those?’

‘Grandfather clocks, hundreds of them.’

The middle of the darkened room lay covered in broken glass and wrecked chandeliers, the floor glistening. The walls housed dozens of tall grandfather clocks, most leant against each other at an angle away from the doors. Some lay face down, others at odd angles. From the ceiling some remaining chandeliers swayed, throwing up odd glints of light.

‘Great, we got a glitter ball,’ Johno muttered as they crunched slowly forwards.

‘Glitter ball?’

‘Like in a disco.’

Thomas laughed. ‘Otto says you like Abba!’

‘Nothing wrong with Abba, you little shitbag,’ Johno muttered as they noisily progressed across the large room.

The central portion of the cavern was bare except for a sprinkling of pictures on the walls; faded oil paintings, some swords and coats-of-arms, some old trumpets and horns.

After fifty yards they came across another set of identical doors. They stopped, glanced at each other, both groaning and sighing. As Johno lit up, for the first time since they entered the complex, Thomas checked the padlock.

‘Like the other one!’ he loudly reported, sounding tired and dejected. He wandered back, letting his arms swing in an exaggerated fashion.

Johno glanced at his watch. Three hours had passed since they had entered the complex.

‘Can we use the tank?’ Thomas quietly wined. ‘I’m cold and I’m hungry.’

Johno took a long drag. ‘First, we warm you up and rest, then we try the artillery, OK?’

Boy Wonder started dragging his heavy, twelve year old frame back to the hole in the door, followed by a dejected Batman.

It only took a few minutes to get a good fire going in the ‘comfy’ house. Johno had filled an old Indian Tea Leaf tin with water and was now heating it. Two china cups had been cleaned by Thomas and a quarter inch of cold water placed into them, as Johno had instructed. Now Johno poured out two ‘waters’, the cold water taking the edge off the boiling tin-water.

‘Try that.’

Thomas sipped. ‘It’s just like warm water.’

‘It *is* ... warm water.’

‘How will this help?’ he protested.

‘It’s not the *tea* in the cup of tea that does all the good,’ Johno began. ‘When you’re a soldier you learn all about the loss of body heat, like wiping our armpits and balls earlier. Hot drinks put the heat back in the body. You know why that is good?’

‘To make you warmer?’

‘Not quite. The warm drink makes you warmer, which means your body don’t need to use the valuable blood

sugar to make you warm. Saves on energy, even if it is just water.'

Trooper Thomas sipped his water considering biology and chemistry. Sitting quietly they both stared at the fire's welcoming flames, listening to the clock that Johnno had fetched from the next room, it's ticking reminding him of his grandmother's house. The sound seemed to reassure him, something modern and regular keeping him firmly in the 21st century.

After ten minutes of sitting quietly in front of the crackling fire Johnno turned his head. 'Feel better?' Thomas nodded, seeming relaxed. 'So, we blow the doors?'

'All the sandbags are wrecked,' Thomas reminded him, holding his cup with two hands and staring at the welcoming fire.

Little 'Steak' loudly greeted them as he entered, jumping up on Thomas and immediately curling into the warm body.

* * *

An hour later Johnno woke in almost complete darkness, just a few embers glowing and the reassuring tick of the old clock. He clicked on his lighter and re-lit a lamp, winding on the wick. Noticing for the first time a box of candles in a white wooden cabinet he lit several, re-starting the fire with fresh paper and wood.

Thomas stirred, waking Steak. 'I fell asleep.'

'We all did – you, me and the fucking bear. That's what blowing up stuff does to you, makes you sleepy. We should've got to bed earlier last night instead of playing computer games.' He sat back, lighting up, the cub raising

its head and stretching his neck and sniffing the new and unfamiliar scent.

‘What do we do now?’ Thomas asked with a yawn.

‘Another cuppa first. Old British Army rule, never try and think about anything without a cuppa in your hand.’ Thomas laughed. ‘I’m not kidding,’ Johnno insisted as he warmed more water in the tin.

‘When we were asleep the ghosts could have come,’ Thomas suggested with a glint in his eye.

‘The only dangerous thing in here ... is me.’

‘That’s true! You wrecked everything.’ Thomas laughed, Steak jumping down.

A nice water feature

1

At the chateau the sun was high, the day warm. Two-dozen K2 staff had arrived by car before the remainder got caught in the roadblocks and the resulting tailbacks; they had been directed to the Spa Hotel.

Maps of the mountain were laid out on the large wooden table, chairs purchased locally arranged around it. A 'food and drinks' team had been set up in the next room and a rotation of guards instigated, everything being organized with Swiss efficiency.

A dozen Czech police had turned up; some local, some traffic police and some State police. They did not know quite what to do and where now leant against a wall and waiting for their bosses. Otto explaining that the Interior Minister was on his way had not cheered the officers.

Beesely's phone chirped. 'Yes?'

'Sir, Mr. Stanton says to tell you ... Chinooks in ten minutes.'

'Thank you.' He hung up and walked outside, grabbing Otto. 'Landing strip?'

Otto pointed to a barren field opposite the chateau. 'That field is the only option.'

Beesely nodded as they walked to the nearest police officer. 'Do any of you, perchance, speak good English?'

A State police officer stepped up. 'Yes, I do.'

'There will be a number of American Army helicopters landing here soon —'

'Here? American Army? What for?'

'Nuclear bomb decontamination unit,' Beesely pointed out, the officer's eyebrows shooting up. 'Yes, that's what

inside the mountain. Did they not say? Anyway, could you please get some of your officers, the brightly coloured ones, to stand on the side of that field there and direct in the helicopters.'

The heavy drone of large helicopters could now be heard.

'Guess they are early,' Beesely began, facing the field. 'You know, the Yanks always used to be late for wars helping out us Brits. These days they like to get right in there early, often before we've even been attacked.'

The police officer did not understand the sarcasm, but he did oblige with two orange-striped motorcycle officers, manoeuvring them to stand on the wall of the field as four Chinooks came into view. The C-130 Hercules appearing overhead was a surprise, especially since there was no airfield nearby. It circled at around three thousand feet as the Chinooks got everyone's attention, drowning out normal conversation.

Beesely and Otto walked back to the chateau as guards emerged, watching the four heavy Chinooks coming in to land.

The first Chinook came in quickly and 'flared', angled back to slow itself down. Hands in pockets, the K2 men watched the Czech police get knocked promptly off the wall, Otto and Beesely glancing at each other. The officers got back up, dusted themselves down then diligently continued to hold out their arms and point at where they thought the helicopters should land. The Chinook pilots put down in a line where *they* wanted to land.

Five minutes later their engines wound down and loadmasters signalled for help. Otto waved the K2 men forwards as familiar decontamination tents started to emerge, the exact same style that had been used at Zug.

From the back of one helicopter an officer emerged, K2 guards running over and shaking the man's hand. Otto turned to Beesely, a silent question.

'I guess so,' Beesely answered. 'We must be keeping the poor chap busy.'

The officer jogged across the field and straddled a low stone wall before bounding up to Beesely. 'Someone call for the US cavalry?'

Beesely smiled formally and stuck out a hand. 'Are we keeping you busy?'

'Yeah, but don't knock it, rest of the year is just simulations and exercises - classroom hero's.' He shook Otto's hand. 'Where's Johnno and Ricky?'

Beesely stopped smiling, glancing at Otto. 'Ricky is dead, I'm afraid.'

The Captain dropped his shoulders. 'Dead? How?'

'Stuck his hand in that dirty bomb a few weeks back, didn't know what it was,' Beesely explained.

'Ah, I'd heard something, didn't know it was him. Heard about Johnno in London though!'

'Yes, he did well.'

The Captain straightened. 'He around?'

'Trapped inside the bomb factory, I'm afraid.'

'Then what the hell we doing stood around here, I brought a top team. What d'ya need?'

'We have an entrance that is radioactive, and a dozen suitcases that just blew up. Inside the cases is, I believe, powder.'

'Powder? Jesus, that's tough to deal with. And you say there was an explosion? So the powder is air-born?'

Beesely took a moment. 'As far as we know.'

'Jesus, air-born powder!'

'That is a problem?' Otto asked,

The Captain raised his eyebrows in mock concern. 'Most protocols say don't go near it! If this was my call I'd seal the cave.'

Beesely tipped his head forwards. 'We don't have that luxury, there are people trapped inside, plus potentially more radioactive oddities down there.'

'If your guys can drive me there I'll suit up and make an assessment. But Beesely, that powder could already be in the lungs of your guys.'

Beesely lowered his head, nodding to himself, and breathed out. 'I know.'

'And if it's air-born outside the cave the local authorities are going to want a twenty or thirty mile exclusion zone downwind. For *everyone*!'

Beesely took a half step forwards and focused his eyes on the man. 'If I have to ... I will go in there myself.'

The Captain nodded, turned and shouted to his men as the C130 came back across. As they glanced up paratroopers emerged, not from the side door as with normal soldiers, but from the rear as if Special Forces. In an instant their chutes were open, a dull green colour.

Men peered skyward, hands over their eyes, especially the police. Someone was breaking *their* exclusion zone. If fact, six of them were.

Within a minute the paratroopers were ready to land on the road in front of the chateau. Beesely and Otto moved to the doorway as the first man landed with a gentle step, his parachute released by two shoulder clips and allowed to drift away, grabbed by K2 men. He took off his helmet and waved. Mr. Grey.

'It is him,' Otto noted, a little surprised.

Grey jogged over, releasing his harness quickly as his associates landed.

‘Sir,’ he greeted Beesely, shaking his hand. ‘Mr. Otto, sir.’

‘You’re the advance guard ahead of Olly getting here?’ Beesely puzzled.

‘No, sir. I brought some friends. Special bomb disposal team, best there is. *Anywhere.*’

‘Glad to hear it, we’ve got some booby-traps in the cave, apparently.’

The Captain walked up, frowning his surprise. Then his eyebrows shot up. ‘Sergeant?’

‘Not a sergeant, I’m afraid,’ Beesely pointed out, enjoying the moment.

Mr. Grey grinned. ‘CIA.’

‘CIA? Shit! What were you doing working as –’

‘Undercover ... Captain,’ Beesely pointed out. ‘Best left at that.’

‘Christ,’ the Captain quietly let out.

Grey’s team assembled. He faced the Captain, a smug grin. ‘Not much we can do till *you* OK the radiation.’

‘Make yourself a coffee, back in ten.’ The Captain ran off.

Beesely put a hand on Mr. Grey’s shoulder. ‘Have some bad news for you.’ Grey’s features hardened quickly. Beesely continued, ‘Herr Mole triggered a booby-trap ... got it full in the face by all accounts.’

Grey lowered his head, placing his hands on his hips. ‘He was a good man, sir. Heart of lion in a small body.’ Lifting his head he added, ‘He told me about the woman, in case he was killed in the States.’

Beesely nodded. ‘We know. We’ll do the best we can for her.’

‘Can’t take revenge on a sixty year old trap,’ Grey quietly pointed out, turning and walking off.

Otto pointed down the road. 'Now comes the quick talking.'

Beesely squinted down the road as a convoy approached. The police were saluting, so that meant Czech authorities. 'Make sure that guns are not visible, especially anything bigger than a pistol, and even then. Any guards inside or around visitors must be unarmed.'

Otto lifted his phone as Beesely stepped forwards.

After much debate as to where to park the lead vehicle parked on the side of the road. Suited bodyguards started to emerge, followed by two aged Army officers. Their slow egress was interrupted slightly by a K2 helicopter coming in to land, rapidly followed by another.

Shooting the helicopters an irritated look Beesely greeted the new arrivals. 'I'm Sir Morris Beesely.'

The first man shook his hand. 'I am Minister Novak.'

'Thank you for attending, Minister. Novak - newcomer to the village, as with Newman in English?'

'You know Czech names.'

'It's Slavic, quite common.'

Novak gave Beesely a look that suggested he would rather be somewhere else, or *anywhere* else. 'Mr. Beesely, this is Mr. Sobek, our Minister for Foreign Affairs.' Beesely shook the man's hand, the two men bowing towards each other politely. 'And this is General Martinek and General Mlynar.'

'I'm sorry to have inconvenienced you all with this discovery,' Beesely offered as Otto stepped up.

General Martinek shrugged slightly. 'We have looked for this place for fifty years, so it is not the inconvenience as you say - perhaps the relief.' His English was almost perfect.

The new arrivals noticed the American soldiers.

‘The decontamination team?’ Novak enquired.

‘Yes,’ Beesely answered. ‘And a bomb disposal team. There appear to be booby-traps in the cave.’

‘Left behind by the Russians?’ General Martinek puzzled.

‘So it would appear,’ Beesely responded as Otto stepped up. ‘This is my number two, Otto, in charge of logistics. If you will come inside, gentlemen, we have a map room set up and some refreshments for you.’ Beesely led them inside. At the map table the visitors assembled, each taking a peek at the layout of the area and the cave.

‘Heavy equipment is on its way,’ Mr. Novak flatly pointed out.

‘I am very grateful,’ Beesely said with a hand on Novak’s arm. ‘My people will direct them to the main entrance. It is quite a rock fall and could take a day or so to clear. And we will pick up any costs.’

Minister Blaum entered with the Swiss Ambassador to the Czech Republic, plus the Czech Ambassador to Switzerland. They greeted and introduced each other.

‘Glad you could make it,’ Beesely told Blaum as they shook hands.

‘Least I can do. Any news?’

Beesely shook his head, offering a worried look.

‘And the entrance has radiation?’ Blaum quietly asked.

‘Afraid so,’ Beesely affirmed.

Refreshments were brought in by guards and offered around.

‘Gentlemen, if you will be seated,’ Beesely called.

Novak’s expression suggested that *someone* was overstepping his authority, but sat along with the rest.

When the group had settled, Beesely finally sat. ‘First, may I thank you all for attending here today, and

apologies for any inconvenience caused. For the benefit of everyone I will first recap on just who we are and what has happened. I am Sir Morris Beesely, the owner of The International Bank of Zurich, Switzerland, but I am English.

‘I purchased this property - actually acquired it free on condition that we renovate it and turn it into a hotel - and we arrived here this morning to have a look at it. Some of my staff drove up the hill to have a look around, since we are interested in buying the land around this chateau.

‘They discovered a cave entrance and ventured inside, the start of this problem. They found several skeletons in the cave entrance and so investigated further. They then found a large room with smooth concrete walls, inside of which was a car and lorry dating back to 1949. Strange thing was, there was no way out for the lorry or car - they had been walled in - just a small door for a man to walk through.’

‘They were walled in?’ Novak queried.

‘Hard to say why at the moment, but one of the walls of this large room was false and we made a hole into it after our people got trapped.’

‘How, exactly, did they get trapped?’ Novak enquired.

Beesely explained, ‘There was a small door in this large room. Two people stepped through and triggered a shutter door that trapped them inside.’

‘It was deliberate, no accident?’ Blaum enquired.

‘No, quite deliberate by the looks of it. No way to open the door from either side, so clearly a trap.’

‘And this hole you made?’ Novak nudged.

‘Our people reported twelve suitcases inside, nothing else. One of our people detected radiation –’

‘How ... did they detect radiation?’ Novak probed. ‘You carry Geiger counters wherever you go?’

Beesely forced a smile. ‘No, of course not. The people trapped inside sent a message out, telling us of the Russian facility inside.’

‘And if they are trapped,’ Novak continued, ‘*how* did you get the message?’

‘Through the metal door trapping them.’ Beesely rapped out SOS in Morse Code on the table.

‘Fortunate that they were expert in this code,’ Novak noted. ‘What, may I enquire, is the background of the people inside?’

Again Beesely forced a smile. ‘Trapped inside is my driver and his twelve year old adopted son.’

That surprised Novak. He was momentarily taken aback. ‘And this ... driver knows this military code?’ Novak pressed, folding his arms.

Beesely focused on Novak. ‘He is ex-military, so yes. When we got the message we flew in a Geiger counter, just an hour from Zurich. It detected the radiation. But when one of my people stepped into the small room something exploded, killing the man. A second man was killed when the metal shutter came down, it cut him in half.’

‘My God,’ Blaum let out.

‘And when, exactly, did you decide to contact the authorities?’ Novak enquired.

‘As soon as we discovered the radiation. That’s when I called you.’

Novak straightened. ‘And within fifteen minutes my President had a call from the US State Department asking that we co-operate with you.’

Beesely took a moment. 'I realised we would need them. You see, Mr. Novak, I know a thing or two about military history and I judged that, by the description of the inside of the complex and the radiation, that it was a dirty bomb facility.'

'Dirty bomb?' one of Generals repeated.

'Inside the cave entrance, behind a false wall, are twelve suitcases which, I believe, have uranium powder inside. The powder came from Nazi uranium captured by the Russians in 1945 - the start of their nuclear development programme. The plan was, I believe, the same for the Germans in 1945 as it was for the Russians in 1946 - drop the radioactive powder over London or Paris, make a lot of people sick. *That* ... is a dirty bomb in its original sense.'

2

Ten minutes later the Captain stepped down from a Range Rover, the car pulling quickly off. With Geiger counter in hand he made his way as quick as he could waddle in his cumbersome suit up the wooded track, now clear of K2 staff. At the cave entrance he stopped and assessed the scene, waving the Geiger counter about and adjusting settings. It registered as clear. In he went.

The dust was settling, but the air was still fogged, his large suit scraping noisily along the walls. He slowed his progress and eased in his shoulders, accidentally stepping on the first skeleton, which was now the worse for wear. 'Jesus!'

Beyond the first metal door he stopped and checked the water. It was, thankfully, clear of radiation - but a

concern; the water was going somewhere and could contaminate the local water table.

At the edge of the large room he got his first radiation reading, a slight elevation. Breathing loudly through his built-in filter he stepped into the chamber, shining his torch about and noting the lights already there. Then he stepped on something, backed up and bent forward, finding a human hand. 'Jesus!' he repeated. Surveying the room he carefully assessed his readings, the only elevated source drawing him to the enlarged hole in the wall.

Kneeling as best he could he operated the Geiger counter in front of the hole to the suitcase annex. The reading came in moderately high, but in this suit he had at least twenty minutes of safe exposure, he estimated. The lower half of the hole appeared smooth enough, so he risked it and crawled slowly and carefully in. Standing, he delicately manoeuvred his torch, looking for booby-traps.

He noted many suitcases across the floor, some closed, several open. Leaning across one he could see the exposed booby-trap, its wires and explosives. It was a simple set up; dated, but effective. The wire movement caused a slight spark, which set-off the explosive housed in durable plastic. Whoever set it knew what they were doing, he considered. And these were made simple - to last to the test of time.

Inside each case he noted a metal sphere, the cause of the radiation. Examining one carefully he noted a screw thread, a simple twist off. Whatever was emitting the radiation lay inside the small spheres.

Then he noticed an isolated sphere on the floor, well away from any suitcase. He lifted it and examined the thread. Discounting a booby-trap mechanism actually

working - having been in close proximity to radiation for sixty years - he unscrewed it.

It was stiff. He applied more force.

It squeaked. He increased the pressure.

It squeaked again.

With one gloved hand above, one below, he turned the top counter-clockwise, his loud breathing distracting him, his visibility limited. Finally it gave, revealing a thread just a few millimetres thick. Lifting one side he peered in, angling the small light on the side of his helmet.

Inside the sphere he noticed fine metal shards, tiny pieces no more than a few millimetres across. And no booby-trap. Whilst holding the sphere carefully he lowered it so that it was exposed to his Geiger counter. The reading came in high, but low compared to what that required for a nuclear bomb or would be emitted by a nuclear reactor.

He screwed it back up, one gentle turn, and placed it down. Back outside he waddled down the hill fifty yards to his waiting men, Mr. Grey sat on the roof of a vehicle.

‘You hear me?’ the Captain asked over his suit radio, sweat now dripping down his face.

‘Yes, sir?’ came from the team’s sergeant.

‘The radiation is below nuke bomb levels, it’s a finally machined metal, almost a powder, dirty bomb standards. It’s all in a dozen small spheres, six inches diameter, simple twist off.’

‘What about booby-traps, sir?’

‘The suitcases have simple pull-friction sparkers with a quarter pound of explosive in plastic. Looks like four or five of the twelve have blown.’

As he reached his men they began to pour buckets of water over his suit, improvised decontamination.

He continued, 'If the cases are brought out closed it shouldn't be a problem. Explosive is not enough to rupture the spheres.'

Grey lifted his radio. 'So the traps are for inquisitive visitors, not part of the dirty bomb?'

'Seems that way.'

'Suit up boys,' Grey calmly ordered. 'We'll blow the boob-traps just outside the cave entrance.'

* * *

Beesely took the call then addressed the assembly. 'I'm afraid that we have confirmed it, radioactive powder. But the area is contained and there is no radiation outside of the cave, in the water or the air.'

The assembled dignitaries were relieved. Even Novak.

Beesely continued, 'The radioactive material will be removed and placed into suitable containers and handed to your people, Minister.'

'We are handing it to the Americans,' Novak admitted. 'They are sending a plane.'

Beesely studied him for a moment. 'After that the Americans will make-safe the explosives. Then, hopefully, we can press on with freeing our people. After that comes the real work ... and the real problems.'

'What problems?' Novak unhappily enquired.

'We don't know what else is inside,' Beesely pointed out. 'There could be a lot more radioactive material in there.'

The half-track's 88mm recoilless rifle appeared to be in good condition. Its mechanism was purely mechanical, nothing electrical or chemical to worry about, it was basically just a long tube.

Thomas fetched more paraffin from the shop and grabbed some cloth, wrapping the end of a large cleaning rod with thin cloth before dousing it in paraffin. As a coordinated team they shoved it in, twisted then pushed; shove twist, shove twist.

A minute later it emerged from the far end, Johno reaching up and pulling out the rod and letting it drop to the floor. With Thomas shining a torch down the barrel he peered inside.

'It's OK,' he suggested, his words echoing oddly down the tube. 'Clean and smooth.'

Next they tackled the shells, Thomas given the task of cleaning the brass casing with paraffin as Johno checked the firing mechanism and closing latch. All seemed to be in order. The original piece of cord used as a trigger was rotten and so they fashioned a piece of wire to it, followed by a length of rope, allowing the firer to be a long way back.

Finally Johno loaded a shell, closed the latch and clambered over the side, the weapon now pointing at the first set of metal doors, dead centre, the hope being to hit the second set once these had gone.

'Ready?' he asked as he neared the Sherman tank.

Thomas peered out of the top hatch wearing an oversized helmet that he had found inside. He nodded, his ears now bunged with cloth. Johno took up station beyond the tank, Thomas watching him progress.

Finally Johno put his hands over his ears, looked up and nodded. Thomas lowered himself into the turret and

yanked hard. Nothing. He tugged again. Nothing. He tugged harder, the wire breaking lose.

‘It’s an old shell!’ Johno shouted. ‘Worth a go.’

Disappointed, and cursing in German, Thomas clambered out of the tank, accepting a hand down from Johno and unplugging his ears.

‘C’mon,’ Johno encouraged. ‘Plenty more stuff in here to try.’ He clambered awkwardly up onto the half-track, tapped the mechanism and tugged the wire.

A bright flash was followed by a deafening bang, the flash leaving a stark and detailed image of the cavern on Johno’s retina, corners and features previously not seen.

The blast was not much, certainly not life threatening to him or the original wartime operators that this weapon had been used by, but his ears were ringing as he peered towards the hole now in the slopping metal doors, figuring it to be around nine inches in diameter. He jumped quickly down, lifting Thomas off the wet floor. They ran to the gap under the metal door and slid under, standing and staring at the far door. They couldn’t see it and so crunched briskly through the glass with lamps outstretched. As with the first door that had been hit by the shell this one had a hole around nine inches in diameter. It was, however, in a reasonable position to reach the bolt on the other side.

Realising that he was not tall enough Johno grabbed a clock with the help of Thomas, stacking two against the doors. Johno jumped up, stuck an arm through as far as he could and shouted, ‘I can reach it!’ He did not have much leverage but alternated the metal handle up and down, the old bolt protesting its disturbance with a sharp metallic squeak. It proved hard work and he started to glisten.

After ten minutes arduous work something popped, the left door opening an inch. Thomas put his shoulder into it, shoving as Johnno stepped down breathing hard. They both pushed until they had opened a twelve-inch gap. With lamps outstretched they squeezed quickly through. They keenly stared ahead through the gloom, then turned and glanced at each other.

‘Bloody ... hell,’ Johnno let out.

4

Otto led Beesely to the next room when the meeting broke for toilet use. ‘This man Novak, we should have him removed,’ he suggested in a whisper.

‘May be a little premature. He seems ... difficult, but we *are* walking all over *his* country.’ Otto seemed unconvinced. Beesely added, whispering, ‘There are probably dead Germans in there, so send for Wilhelm or a senior German official, they have a lot of influence with the Czechs. We’ll gang up on him.’

Otto brightened a little and nodded. They returned to the ‘map room’. Novak lowered his phone, looking even more disgruntled than before.

‘Problems,’ Beesely gently enquired.

‘That was the Russian Ambassador,’ he informed the room. ‘They know there are dead Russians in there and they are insisting that the remains be handed over.’

‘That seems reasonable,’ Beesely suggested. ‘What is the normal practice when fifty year old Russian soldiers are found?’

‘I ... am not aware of the Russians asking us for such a thing before,’ Novak admitted. He turned to an Army general. That man had not dealt with such a matter either.

Beesely made a face. 'It's not my responsibility, or area of interest, Minister, but it seems reasonable for them to ask for their dead back. But it is a little ... one sided.'

'One sided?' Novak repeated with a quizzical expression.

'Well, here we are ... risking our lives to decontaminate this place and rescue our people, then clean up the mess that *the Russians* left behind. And all the time *they* have the plans for that cave and could help us gain entry and disarm any booby-traps at the same time.'

Novak and his Foreign Minister brightened, standing and glancing at each other. 'You are correct,' Novak affirmed. 'They should help!' The Foreign Minister raised his mobile and stepped out.

* * *

The Czech mining experts stood at the main entrance along with K2 staff, all with hands on hips.

'It looks like it was blown up,' a man suggested.

'We think so,' a K2 man offered.

'Which means, as we remove the rocks, more will fall,' the mining engineer unhappily pointed out.

'You each get a thousand euro a day bonus,' the K2 man pointed out.

They got to work.

5

'What is it?' Thomas asked.

'It's a German rocket plane, intact and good condition. Shit.'

They approached and inspected the aircraft. The cockpit glass rested open, Johnno lifting Thomas for a quick peek inside.

‘It’s like other planes,’ Thomas noted. ‘Many dials.’

‘Well ahead of its time,’ Johnno pointed out as he ran a hand over the wing. ‘Swept delta wing, rocket engine.’ He lifted his lamp and surveyed the rest of the room. He could see the outlines of more memorabilia through the gloom, boxes against the walls, paintings, some rifles from the Second World War, some swords. Beyond the jet-fighter stood a ... Volkswagen camper van. He stopped dead and stared, mouth open.

‘What is it?’ Thomas asked when noticed Johnno’s look. ‘Is it dang-er-ous?’

‘Depends on the type of girl you get in there.’

Thomas walked forwards, puzzled. ‘I have seen this many times. Not dang-er-ous.’ He pressed hard with his thumb at the key button, tugged several times and managed to open a door and poke his head inside.

Johnno opened the driver’s door and sat inside. ‘This takes me back.’

‘You know this car?’

‘Yeah, it dates to 1965 - or later. My mate had one around 1984.’

‘Someone was here, after 1950?’ Thomas surmised.

‘Oh, yeah, this collection was being appreciated long after 1956 - by someone who didn’t mind ghosts or bodies. Well, either didn’t mind, or didn’t give a shit.’ Thomas looked up, not understanding. Johnno explained, ‘The people who brought this car here, they knew about the bodies.’ Johnno stared ahead, a heavy frown creasing his brow.

They jumped down into an inch of cold water and walked past a lorry to the next set of doors.

‘What is it?’ Thomas asked.

‘Stay back!’ Johnno snapped as he drew level. ‘There’s a booby trap wired to the doors.’

‘It is a stupid trap, we can see it!’

Johnno frowned at it through the dim light, turning and staring back down the cavernous enclosure before making eye contact with a curious Thomas. ‘It is meant for people coming in through the doors the other way, not this way.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘We’re inside,’ Johnno suggested. ‘Whoever locked those doors didn’t go out this way.’ He carefully checked the mechanism and wires to see if someone could have set them before pulling the doors closed behind them.

‘Inside?’ Thomas repeated, still confused.

Johnno turned. ‘There’s another way out.’

‘The way we came in?’

‘No, I don’t think so. Someone using that would risk bringing down that metal sheet. Besides, it was blocked up a long time. You remember the skeletons in the first part?’

‘Yes, there were three.’

‘And they died from the gas. So the stiff’s were in here, managing to run out that way, and they wouldn’t run that way if they knew about the metal shutter or the entrance being blocked. They ran that way because that was an entrance in use, maybe up to 1956.’

‘The people who killed them, they closed the tunnel?’

‘I think so, and put that metal sheet there - or at least set it as a trap, after the Russians were dead. Odd thing is, the bodies.’

‘Why?’

‘Why leave them? They would smell bad ... and are bad for your health,’ Johno explained. ‘And more to the point there’re none here, in these rooms.’ He considered it, running a hand over his moustache.

‘Skeletons are not bad for you ... these do not smell?’

‘Which means,’ Johno quietly puzzled, ‘they blocked up the entrance, and somebody came back later - maybe ten years.’

‘The people who killed them?’

‘Or somebody else, someone who knew about it. The Volkswagen camper van was maybe 1964, so that’s ten years later. And those padlocks look later again.’

‘But they stopped visiting the tanks?’

Johno stared back down the room towards the memorabilia. ‘The tanks haven’t been visited for a long time, maybe thirty years or more. Someone was here around 1964 ... for a few years maybe. After that ... they stopped coming.’

‘But why, if these things are good money?’ Thomas asked in his accented voice.

‘Good ... question. And one I aim to answer, Boy Wonder.’ Thomas smiled. ‘OK, there’s another way out, something hidden. We need to find it.’

‘The bear knows!’

‘I’m starting to think he might,’ Johno said as they started walking. ‘Where is the little bugger?’

‘He went towards the village.’

Johno stopped. ‘OK, you take this wall, always left. Look for a secret passage or door. I’ll be on the right. OK?’

Thomas quickly trotted to the far left corner and held up his lamp, checking the smooth concrete walls as he slowly advanced. Johno turned and doubled back to the

right hand corner to begin a parallel process. They moved boxes away from the walls, checking high and low. They even checked behind the oil paintings. It took thirty minutes before they met back at the doors having found nothing of interest.

The chandelier room offered little promise, but the room was relatively bare in comparison to the others and so quicker to check. Thomas knocked over many clocks in sequence, checking behind them. Johno checked the opposite side, behind some heavy boxes, again finding nothing.

In the tank room they started the process again, Thomas warned to be very careful. They moved boxes, shone torches at shadows up the walls and banged at the concrete with hammers. The room took forty minutes and they were both suffering.

‘Nothing?’ Johno asked as they met at the broken doors.

Thomas shook his head, clearly dejected.

‘Can you check under the vehicles for me?’ Johno quietly asked. ‘My knee’s hurting.’

Thomas sighed and headed back, ducking under each vehicle and looking for a trap door, but not finding any. He squeezed under the doors five minutes later, Johno emerging from the ground level offices on the right.

‘OK?’ Johno called, his words echoing.

Thomas gave a lazy ‘thumbs up’ in front of his torch, stoically starting on the first office on the left and offering a tired ‘hello’ to each skeleton in turn as they sat at their desks.

They met at the door to the village, Johno putting a hand on the boy’s shoulder. ‘We’ll check the village, then a nice cuppa, eh?’ The lack of a response quickly became

a worry. The boy was tired and cold and had been in this stale air for almost six hours.

They both checked the well. It obviously went somewhere, but would that be out?

‘A small person can go down there,’ Thomas quietly offered, the energy gone from his voice.

‘They couldn’t have used that to move equipment in and out. Whoever came and went brought lights and other bits of equipment.’

They tapped the walls behind the well and then entered the cottage together, examining the walls and stamping on the floor. They even checked the thatch roof.

Next came the ironmongers. Wooden shelves prevented them accessing the back walls and so they pulled them down with a clatter, finding just concrete behind. The ladies dress shop offered similar shelves, the back wall painted. They tapped away hard with hammers, finding nothing. The butchers had a wooden panel at the rear covering one half and oddly out of character with the rest of the shop. Johno jammed his hammer behind the edge of the wood and ripped it off. Again nothing.

‘What is it?’ Thomas asked, pointing.

Johno focused on the bare concrete wall where Thomas held a finger, moving his lamp closer. On the wall Johno noted a mark, a snaking line with a ‘H’ letter through the middle of it. He rubbed his fingers over the mark. ‘It’s a ‘concrete signature’. I had a friend who was a builder, he did them sometimes, somewhere inside where you couldn’t see it.’

‘Graf-eee-tee,’ Thomas carefully pronounced. Badly.

‘No, it says who did it. Pride in their work.’

Finally they reclaimed the ‘comfy’ house, making a fire and sitting. Thomas fetched more water and they ‘brewed up’ British Army style.

Ten minutes later, just as they were getting drowsy, little Steak could be heard, wandering in a few seconds later. Johno let his hand down, the bear cub licking it briefly before it jumped up onto him. He frowned strongly at the bear.

‘He will not bite you,’ Thomas said, peering out from under heavy eyelids.

‘I like this bear,’ Johno stated. He lifted a leaf off the bears back and held it for Thomas to see.

‘What is it?’

‘Have you seen any bushes in here?’

‘He was outside?’

‘Recently. Now all we have to do is to follow him to wherever he goes, when he decides to go there.’

They sighed together, staring at the bear cub as it promptly fell asleep. Very gently, Johno lifted the dozy bear onto Thomas.

‘Give him half an hour,’ Johno whispered. ‘I am going to check the village.’ He left on tiptoes.

The pub did not reveal a secret passage, but another Whisky warmed his insides. The wall next to the bar got quietly tapped, nothing revealed. The bank offered up a small amount of old currency, some notes and coins, but no secret rooms or doorways. Then came the gap in between the buildings, earnestly tapped high and low.

The schoolrooms teasingly offered rotting wooden panels in all the rooms. Johno tapped a few, ripping one out before tapping the remainder in the second classroom, smashing numerous holes into the rotten wood and revealing the concrete hidden behind. There remained only

the mini-cloakroom. He tapped the back panel, finding it hollow; distinctly, welcomingly hollow.

He stepped back, turned up the wick in the lamp and carefully surveyed the area. A small handle, easily missed. With a deep breath he pulled on it, clicking some internal mechanism and opening the door. The next sound he recognised. Ping!

Turning, he ran through the door, taking two big steps as he dropped the lamp, diving head first as the grenade detonated.

A Twix, a Rollo and the Mars bar

1

‘No!’ Thomas screamed at the top of his voice as he ran towards Johnno’s seemingly lifeless body, a plume of smoke coming from the school. He slid to a halt, dropped his lamp with a clatter and tried to turn Johnno over. Johnno’s lamp lay broken and on its side but still alight, offering some extra illumination from its flickering flame.

Johnno groaned as Thomas used all his might to turn him, blood coming from Johnno’s nose and lips. ‘My arse,’ he whispered.

‘What?’ Thomas shouted, his eyes now full of tears.

‘My ... arse.’

Thomas patted Johnno’s bum, finding it warm and wet. Lifting his hand he could see it was blood. ‘You are hurt!’ he screamed.

‘I’ll live. Calm down.’ Little Steak licked Johnno’s face, causing him to laugh. ‘Ain’t dead yet, fucker. Shoo!’

Thomas laughed through the tears.

‘Help me up,’ Johnno urged in a laboured whisper, Thomas using all his strength to get Johnno to his hands and knees, easing him upright. ‘Get the first aid kit.’

‘Where did we put it?’

‘By the second door, on the right, I think,’ Johnno managed to get out. ‘I’ll be in the house.’ He forced himself fully upright. Thomas ran off, chased by a complaining Steak.

Johnno hobbled along, holding his butt cheeks with a hand. In their new home he was greeted by the warm and welcoming orange glow from the fire. Painfully, he

dropped his trousers, running his hand over the cheeks. He was now bleeding badly.

Hurried footsteps and a complaining bear signalled Thomas's return. 'God!' the boy gasped.

'Never seen a man's arse before?' Johno croaked.

'You are hurt bad!' He placed the first aid kit on the table.

Johno opened it with blood soaked fingers. He ripped open a sterile pad and wiped the blood as best he could. Next he passed Thomas a tube of anti-septic cream. 'This'll have to do. Spread it onto the cuts.'

'They are bleeding.'

'Do it anyway,' Johno encouraged, emptying the first aid kit. He retrieved a suture and hook-nosed needle kit.

Next came the tricky bit. Thomas fetched water and cleaned the wounds, applying more cream. Now he had to do what he was told. Exactly. Johno handed him a threaded needle and explained in great detail.

The screams scared the bear out of the house and echoed around the cavern, bouncing off the village walls and repeating.

Johno gently examined the band-aids on his butt cheeks. 'Good job,' he croaked, his voice going. 'Hope you did good stitches, I don't want any scars!' He eased down onto the damp sofa, lying on his side. 'Whisky, from the bar, bottle on the counter.'

Thomas diligently fetched the bottle, pouring some into a cup and handing it to Johno.

The wounded grown-up gulped down the drink and loudly exhaled. 'Ah, much better. You did a good job,' he commended, waving the cup. Thomas poured more whisky, appreciatively gulped down. Johno closed his

eyes and eased back, roused a moment later by his little charge cleaning the blood off his nose and lips and applying cream before fixing numerous band-aids.

‘Now you look normal,’ Thomas offered. They both laughed.

‘You got an alarm on your wrist watch?’

‘Yes, and mobile phone.’

‘Set it for one hour, let me sleep. You get some rest as well.’

Thomas took the empty cup off the injured grown-up and placed some cloth over him as a blanket. ‘You sleep.’

A noise brought Thomas around an hour later. He had been dozing, Steak fast asleep next to Johno. His patient’s mouth hung open, the wounded hero breathing loudly.

Another noise. Where the rescuers breaking through?

He quietly eased up, putting more wood on the ebbing fire before stepping quietly out, turning up the wick on a lamp. In the middle of the village street he stood and listened. The sound seemed to be coming from the office block cavern.

Stepping through the wooden door he was startled when something hit the floor up ahead, an odd sound issued. He held out the lamp and tapped his holstered pistol before bravely walking forwards and negotiating the skeletons.

Near the tin that Johno had said killed all the people lay a Mars bar. Then he spotted a packet of Rollo and a Twix. He snatched them up and pocketed them, straining to look up and seeing the next packet fall. He almost caught it, snatching at the air with a huge smile. Glucose tablets.

‘Thank you!’ he shouted.

An oddly distorted voice echoed down the air vent, but he could not understand it. Checking the floor he found another two packets of glucose tablets and another Mars bar. Next came a packet of cigarettes with a lighter stuffed inside. It made him smile as he pocketed it, Johno would be pleased.

After a minute wait, looking up, nothing more came down. He carefully checked the area around the tin, not finding any additional goodies. Then came a metallic clank from above. He waited, breathing loudly, as the sounds grew. He peered up through the gloom, stepping back and sideways for a better look up at the black cavern roof.

A clinking sound wafted and echoed around the cavern. Then he noticed something being lowered down on a piece of wire. Slowly it inched down, before speeding up and landing right in his hand. Smiling widely he pressed the TRANSMIT button on the side. ‘Hello?’

‘Thomas?’ crackled a man’s voice.

‘Yes, who’s that?’

‘It’s Simon, big Simon, you know me.’

‘Yes, I remember. You have come to rescue us?’

‘Where is Johno?’

‘He is sleeping. There was a bomb and he was hurt in the arse.’ Thomas paused, but no response came back. ‘Hello?’

‘Yes, we are still here. Is Johno hurt bad?’

‘No, he says he will be OK. I did the stitches on his skin and he screamed like a baby!’

‘You just hang on, we are looking for a way to get you out.’

‘What about the big metal door? Johno said you would burn it.’

Simon paused before answering. 'We cannot go into that tunnel, it is radioactive. You understand?'

'Radiation? Yes, Johno said this was a Russian bomb factory, 1950.'

'What else is down there, Thomas?'

'Uh ... there is room for machines and making things, then there is the village –'

'Village?'

'Yes, it's a little English village in a big room. Johno says that the Russians and Germans ... they trained spies here for going to England.'

'What else?'

'There is a room of offices and a hundred dead people.'

'Dead?' crackled the voice.

'Skeletons, like the first tunnel. Then there is a room with a tank and a submarine, a tank and bombs and rockets in,' he excitedly reported. 'Then a room of clocks and a glitter ball for Abba and a door with a bomb on it we did not go through.'

'OK, Thomas, listen. We will be here all the time. When Johno is awake ... use this radio, OK?'

'Yes. Can you send some British Army tea-bags and sugar?'

'Oh ... er ... hold on.' The voice crackled off.

He waited.

Something soft hit him on the head a minute later. He bent and picked it up. A tea bag. Next came a small white packet of sugar.

Otto took the message from Simon. He lowered the phone as they sat in the chateau's garden, the sun low in the sky. 'I think maybe the Russians may now wish to help.'

Beesely slowly raised his head. 'Really. Why?'

'A hundred or more dead Russians down there.'

Beesely's eyebrows shot up. 'A hundred?' He glanced at the stream. 'Dear God. What else?'

'Johno is hurt, not badly according to Thomas.'

'Hurt how? A booby-trap?'

Otto offered Beesely a pained expression. 'A grenade into his backside.'

Beesely winched and breathed in sharply. 'It would be old and dirty metal, so septicaemia will set in. He'll go into shock in a day or two. He needs out before then or he'll die.'

Otto straightened, concerned. 'Thomas reported also that there is a machine room.'

Beesely nodded. 'That adds up. Machine room and suitcase dirty bombs. All starting to fit now.'

'He also reports a ... *village* inside a cavern.'

'Village?' Beesely puzzled.

'A re-creation of an English village. Johno says that German and Russian spies trained there, before going to England.'

'Ah, now that's making a lot more sense. Train the spies in English customs then drop them in with suitcase dirty bombs. I remember reading the report.'

Otto tipped his head. 'You read about this place?'

'After the last war it was rumoured that the Germans had a pound or two of uranium, talk of it going by U-Boat to Japan. There was also talk of it, in fact plans found, to make radioactive powder and to fly it over London and to release the powder – a last desperate act of Hitler in his

bunker. Those suitcases and that powder were to be hand delivered, spread around. Sixty years ahead of those Arabs the other week!’ He raised his phone. ‘Oliver Stanton, please.’ They waited.

‘Beesely?’

‘Olly, we found it - suitcase powder dirty bombs, Nazi spy training facility, re-creation of an English village in the cave!’

‘Dear God, man, we’ll have to re-write some history books!’

‘That’s for certain. There are also a hundred dead Russians down there.’

‘A hundred? So not just some stragglers who got caught.’

‘You know what I’m thinking?’ Beesely posed.

‘Comrade Stalin,’ Stanton confidently suggested.

‘I’ll get back to you when I have more.’ Beesely hung up.

‘What was that?’ Otto enquired.

‘Stalin. He had a way of covering up various projects, maintaining secrecy by removing the research and then killing everyone involved.’

‘The Russians, they killed their own people?’

Beesely seemed disappointed with the question. ‘Stalin killed more Russians than Hitler did, you should know that.’

‘I have read some of the history, yes. But why here?’

‘Cover his tracks, I suppose. Those suitcase dirty bombs were on their way to England. Desperate act of a desperate man.’

‘Desperate? Stalin or Hitler?’

‘Both, but for different reasons. After the war and up until around 1955 the Russians did not have an effective

nuclear bomb or way to deliver it to the west. Americans could have nuked Russia with no problem. Stalin knew it, so he had a few crazy plans, including *our* dirty bombs - Uranium grabbed from the Germans at the end of the war.'

Otto was surprised, staring back.

'Yes,' Beesely affirmed. 'What's in that cave was, I believe, ordered by Stalin himself, so to the execution of those Russians once the suitcases were ready. Sealed them into the wall with concrete, collapsed the cave and waited until they were needed. Odd bit is, they never came back for them.'

'It is strange, yes. Thomas also said there are German weapons in there, a submarine with torpedoes.'

'Submarine!' Beesely snapped. 'We're land-locked here. Nearest ocean is bloody long way off!' He frowned hard at the grass. 'What else did he say?'

'There are bombs, rockets and a tank.'

'A tank?' Beesely puzzled. 'And rockets? Why the hell would the Russians allow stuff like that inside that place? Doesn't make sense.'

'Now that we have a radio link we can talk to Johnno.' Otto took a call. 'The dirty bomb room has been cleared,' he informed Beesely, just as distant explosions echoed down the valley. 'That is the booby-traps being dealt with. One problem, the people with the metal cutting equipment will need to be in decontamination suits.'

'Some residual radiation?'

'A small amount, yes.'

Beesely observed a Czech police helicopter. 'Maybe Mr. Grey or the Captain could cut the door.'

'I will suggest it,' Otto said, raising his phone.

'Be dark soon, have to move to that hotel.'

Johno lifted his eyelids and sniffed, Thomas holding a cup under his nose. 'Hey buddy,' he quietly let out as his eyes focused on the brown liquid. 'Smells like tea?'

'It is! And sugar. And we have chocolate and something called glue-cooose'.

Johno eased upright and woke the poor emaciated bear as Thomas placed a Rollo into the cub's mouth. 'Where did this lot come from?'

'They dropped it down the small hole,' Thomas said, beaming a huge smile. 'I spoke to them and asked for tea bags.'

Johno sipped the tea, tested the temperature then took several quick gulps. 'Ah ... that's good,' he let out, accepting a Mars bar from his little helper. The bar went in whole, chewed and swallowed, washed down with tea. Next he wolfed down half a pack of glucose tablets and eased slowly upright as the cub filled up on Rollos.

'More cigarettes,' Thomas pointed out.

Johno lit up and stretched his back, carefully probing his butt cheeks. For the most part they were numb, which was not a good sign. He took a long drag and breathed out slowly. 'OK, let's go talk to the outside world, shall we?' Thomas assisted Johno outside and to the office cavern.

Johno pressed TRANSMIT on the dangling radio. 'How's the weather up there, fuckers?'

'Johno?' crackled Simon's voice.

'Who else? It's just us two, the bear and the rats.'

'Bear?'

'Yeah, we got a bear stuck in here with us.'

'Is it dangerous? You have your gun?'

‘The only danger is that I kill it and eat it. Don’t worry, it only weighs about four kilos.’

‘A baby bear?’

‘Yeah. What’s been happening your end?’

‘Herr Mole was killed.’

Johno lowered his head and breathed out hard, his shoulders dropping. They made eye contact, Thomas suddenly saddened. ‘How?’ he asked, still focused in the boy.

‘There was a false wall, in the first room –’

‘I remember.’

‘Well, we made a hole and he went in. He said there were many suitcases in there, but we detected radiation –’

‘Radiation?’

‘Yes. Then there was an explosion. Now they are removing the radioactive material.’

‘That makes some sense. I found a machine room and an office complex here, complete with technical drawings, and *they* had radiation symbols on them. But I haven’t seen anything down here that could make any significant bomb - one small machine room and a dozen offices. And about thirty skeletons.’

‘These people, they were trapped inside?’

‘No.’ Johno glanced at Thomas. ‘Someone dropped a can of Nazi Zyklon-B down this air-vent.’

Simon paused. ‘Are you sure?’

Johno kicked the tin. ‘The tin is still here,’ he quietly stated.

‘Someone closed the entrance after?’

‘Listen, there’s a Volkswagen camper van here, from maybe 1964.’

‘1964?’

‘Yeah. So someone was visiting this place long after the people here died. I think they died around 1955. So someone came here ten years later, you understand?’

‘Yes. Is there any sign of recent use?’

‘No, nothing for at least thirty years. Listen, you got any C4?’

‘C4? No, not here. We had some detonation cord, but we used it to clear trees. And Johnno, I don’t want to drop C4 down this shaft.’

‘We may need it to blow a door with booby traps on. There’s plenty of black powder down here and artillery shells, which still work.’

‘Still work? How do you know?’

‘I fired one through a couple of doors.’

‘Johnno, you must be careful in there.’

‘Yes, mum. Listen, bring Beesely up-to-date, we’re going to find another way out. Don’t be surprised if we don’t make contact, we maybe a long way off. It’s large down here - very large! Oh, tell Beesely there is an original ME163 down here, and a mini-sub. Johnno out.’

They ambled back to their lounge, another ‘brew’ a necessity before the British Army decided on a course of action.

4

Beesely took the call. ‘An ME163, dear God! A mini-sub? Talk about re-writing the history books. What?’ Beesely listened, his face ashen. He hung up and faced Otto.

‘Are you OK?’ Otto asked, now concerned.

‘There’s a 1964 Volkswagen camper van in there!’

Otto’s eyes widened. ‘Someone was here in 1964?’

‘With an access point big enough to get a van in there. And I’m starting to think that all this Nazi memorabilia was not here when the Russians were using it - they would have had it away as trophies.’

‘It is very strange. I do not understand what happened here.’

‘That makes two of us,’ Beesely unhappily agreed.

Beesely’s phone rang. He listened. ‘OK, thank you.’ He faced Otto, his eyelids heavy. ‘The Russians were, apparently, killed with a tin of Zyklon-B.’

Otto’s eyebrows shot up. ‘Zyklon-B? From Auschwitz?’

Beesely lowered his head as he thought. ‘I suppose the Russians back then would have had a stock, they liberated the camps after all.’

‘And they used it on their own people?’ Otto asked in a strained whisper.

‘Some of the things Stalin did would make you lose a lot of sleep,’ Beesely quietly stated, making firm eye contact. ‘Let’s break the bad news.’

In the map room people were packing up and getting ready to head to the Spa Hotel or back to Prague.

‘Gentleman, if I may have your attention,’ Beesely stiffly called.

The assembled guests stopped what they were doing and faced him.

‘We have some news from inside the complex, from our people trapped inside. We have managed to lower a radio with a wire connection down an airshaft. The complex is, apparently, very large inside. There is the recreation of an English village –’ the Czechs glanced at each other. ‘- which we think was used for the training of

spies in English traditions. There are some old pieces of old German armaments, including an original ME163.'

Novak's group were both surprised, and now intrigued.

Beesely took a breath and straightened. 'It would also appear that the hundred odd dead Russians down there were killed with a tin of Nazi Zyklon-B.'

A chorus of shocked whispers shot around the room.

Beesely added, 'I think, maybe, that the Russians covered their tracks and killed their scientists, then collapsed the cave entrances. The dirty bombs in the suitcases were left in a position where they could have been dug out and used later, if needed.'

'That makes no sense,' Blaum pondered, Novak agreeing. 'Why not take them back to Russia, under guard. Why leave them here?'

'That, gentlemen, is for the historians to find out, or maybe we can ask the Russians if they send someone. Anyway, we have rooms for all of you at the hotel, food and refreshments - all paid for by our bank for anyone who wishes to avail themselves of the facilities. We shall also arrange fresh shirts and clothes for you, gentlemen.'

As they walked outside to their vehicles, all except the Army Generals indicated that they would be staying at the nearby Spa hotel.

5

'We need to check for any other passages, just the machine room left,' Johnno commented, savouring the tea.

'Maybe the bear came in during the night, through the open tunnel,' Thomas idly suggested.

'Of course! They opened the entrance last night and waited for us to arrive. The little bag-of-bones wandered

in, thinking it a nice cosy cave.’ He paused. ‘No, that don’t make sense, where did the leaf come from?’

‘It was on him before?’

‘No, we both stroked him several times. No leaf.’

‘So he knows a way out?’

‘Maybe. We’ll have a look.’

The lamp faded and went out as they both observed its dying flame. Johnno reached across and shook it, the lamp now empty, just an orange glow from the fire illuminating the room. ‘We’ll have to check the ironmongers for more paraffin.’

‘There are some small white tins,’ Thomas informed Johnno, getting up and going before he had been asked, back a minute later with three tins. Twisting the rusty top off one Thomas recognised the smell. ‘It is the same smell.’ He opened the small nozzle on the empty lamp and carefully poured for twenty seconds. Closing the nozzle and unscrewing the warm glass he re-lit the wick with Johnno’s lighter, the room bright again a moment later.

Johnno cocked an eyebrow, an amused smile forming. ‘Well then, I’ll just sit here while you find us a way out.’

Thomas offered up a confident smile. ‘Me and Steak will check the machine room.’

Johnno eased up, wincing in agony. ‘With me watching close by,’ he forced out in a strained whisper. He arched his back. ‘C’mon, young *Indiana Jones*.’

The walls between the village and the right-angled corridor revealed nothing other than damp concrete walls, no sign of any holes that Steak could have got in through or out of. But the cub disappeared in the machine room.

‘He’s gone!’ Thomas shouted.

‘Good, so there’s a hole here someplace.’

Starting inside the door, on the immediate left, they worked their way cautiously around. They knocked down a metal sheet with an almighty clatter but found nothing behind it. The walls leading to the large metal plate that trapped them were smooth and clear of obstructions. Beyond the plate, and the half-body, the walls were again smooth. They struggled to move a wooden set of shelves, letting them fall forwards and smash loudly, throwing up a cloud of dust. Nothing. They were back at the entrance.

‘I don’t understand!’ Thomas complained, kicking the lathe whilst coughing out dust.

‘If there’s no hole in the walls, then it’s in the floor, under something.’

They started to search. Then there it was, a large drain with the grill moved off to one side. Carefully, inch-by-inch, they eased under the lathe and pushed their lamps in. The mouth of the drain appeared big enough for Steak, maybe for Thomas at a squeeze, but looked far too dangerous to try. They eased back up.

‘That leaves the big doors,’ Johno began, ‘which lead to the *other* collapsed entrance, or we try the dodgy school room.’

‘The school room has bombs!’

‘It’s the only way out, unless you want to wait for them to dig us out? This metal door would be quicker, but they can’t get near it because of the radiation. And that main entrance may take a week to get out of.’

‘They will send us food down the hole,’ Thomas suggested as they made for the exit.

‘You want to stay here for a week?’ Johno quietly posed.

Thomas gave it some careful thought. ‘No.’

‘Good, because my arse would be infected before then and I’d be dead in ... oh ... about two days.’

Thomas snapped his head up as they stepped back into the corridor. ‘You will die? We must go quickly to a doctor.’

‘Got no argument from me there, short-arse.’ Johno rested a hand on the boy’s shoulder as they walked back.

Outside the schoolhouse they stopped and stared at it.

‘Right, young man, earn your bloody keep. Find some rocks, sticks, metal bars. Throw them down the passageway then run very quickly back here. Understand?’

‘Yes,’ Thomas enthusiastically replied as he ran into the ironmongers behind them, emerging a few seconds later with an arm full of garden tools, forks and spades. He dropped them with a clatter at the school entrance then lobbed the first spade down the passageway, ducking along the school’s brick wall. The clatter of metal on metal echoed up the passage, but no explosion followed. Next came a trowel, thrown hard. Again nothing. Then a large hammer, banging loudly down unseen metal steps.

‘Drop your torch in,’ Johno suggested. ‘Gently.’

Thomas stepped to within a foot of the entrance, shined the torch all round the inside then let it drop, rushing out. They waited, but nothing went bang. Johno stepped in, turning up his re-filled lamp. Carefully, they both checked the doorway to the secret passage.

They found chiselled rock, with nowhere to hide a booby trap, the opening about the size of a large cupboard and housing the start of a spiralled metal staircase. Thomas’s torch lay visible around twelve feet down, illustrating the patterned metal steps corkscrewing downwards, no wires visible so far.

Johno straightened and arched his back. 'Go and fetch one of the ropes we brought in, the other torches and first aid packs.' Thomas ran off as Johno leant against a wall, delicately probing his damp nether-regions and lighting up.

With a rope slung over a shoulder, torch and lamp in hand, metal helmet back on, explorer Thomas stood ready. With a huge smile, and a tap on Thomas' helmet, Johno led the way slowly down the steps. Touching a trowel with his foot he kicked it lower and waited before kicking the hammer lower in a similar fashion. Finally they hit bottom around ten metres down, finding a tunnel, a cold breeze heading back up the stairwell.

'What was that?' Thomas asked.

Johno turned an ear to the breeze. 'Sounded like Steak.' Thomas looked back up the stairs. 'No, down here.'

Thomas shone his torch into the tunnel, his light reflecting off the wet floor. They peered in, but couldn't see anything.

'Maybe that drain ends up down here,' Johno whispered. 'C'mon.'

They inched carefully forwards, checking the walls and the ceiling for anything unusual; pressure plates, wires, booby-traps of any kind. It took a tiring ten minutes to reach the end, finding a cavern some five metres high and just as wide. The sound of running water grew louder, the odd cry from Steak echoing to them from the shadows. Splitting up, they examined the walls of the cavern carefully.

'Look,' Thomas whispered.

Johno turned and crossed the cavern, bringing his lamp to bear. They both stood staring down at a skeleton.

‘It’s a woman,’ Thomas suggested. ‘Look at the shoes.’

‘Yeah,’ Johno agreed with a heavy frown.

‘She was chained to the wall,’ Thomas quietly pointed out.

‘And left some food and drink,’ Johno noted, kicking a plate and a bottle.

‘She was a prisoner?’

‘Good question. I don’t think she was one of the Russians, and this body looks later than the others.’ He knelt awkwardly, putting down his lamp. Closer to the skeleton now he noticed a glint, finding a silver locket clutched in one hand. Lifting it out of the lady’s skeletal hand he fumbled to open it, holding it close to the lamp to illuminate the contents. Smiling back at him were two faces he recognised. The inscription read, ‘To Marianne, from Gunter’.

‘Oh ... no,’ he muttered. He snapped the locket shut, put it in a pocket and slowly stood with the help of Thomas.

‘What is it?’ Thomas quietly asked, now concerned.

Johno took several deep breaths. ‘Drop your equipment, take a lamp and go back to the radio.’ Thomas started to take off the rope. ‘Tell them to give a message to Beesely, very important, just one word - Gunter.’

‘Gunter?’ Thomas repeated with a sceptical frown.

Johno put a hand on the boy’s shoulder. ‘Ask no questions, do as I ask, go carefully.’

Thomas splashed quickly back along the tunnel, his footsteps on the metal stairwell echoing a few seconds later. Johno lit up, breathing out slowly as he studied Marianne’s remains, his aching body now very heavy.

‘Even after death that arsehole is hurting people.’

She lay with her hands bound and chained off to one side, the food plate and bottle the other way. Her blonde hair was still clearly visible, her teeth, some jewellery and a watch. Judging by the decayed clothing she had not been wearing much, maybe just a slip, left to freeze and starve, nibbled at by the rats.

‘So this is why he never came back,’ he quietly told himself. ‘You were here, putting him off re-visiting. All this shit starting to make some sense now, love.’

He rubbed his face. ‘You’ll be glad to know your boy turned out OK, *and* he killed Gunter and nicked his money. We’re making good use of it.’ Steak’s pitiful cry wafted by on the breeze. ‘Beesely’s here too, up top. He’s still going strong, still causing trouble.’

Thomas reappeared with a burst of light and panting.

‘All OK?’ Johno quietly asked, still focussed on the skeleton.

‘Yes,’ the boy panted. ‘Who is she?’

‘Someone very special, and very important, to Beesely and Otto.’

Thomas was staggered. ‘You know her?’ he gasped, studying the laying form.

‘We’ll talk of it later,’ Johno quietly suggested. ‘First, we need to get the hell out of this ... *fucked up* place.’ He turned towards the only way to progress, another tunnel similar to the one leading to the stairwell. They raised their lamps and stared down the tunnel, the cold breeze catching their damp hair and chilling them.

‘C’mon,’ Johno sighed. ‘If someone used this tunnel for regular access it can’t be too long ... or difficult.’

In the hotel bar Beesely lowered the phone and collapsed into a seat, helped by Otto and others, all now seriously concerned for his health.

‘Are you OK?’ Otto whispered, a trembling desperation in his voice. ‘What was the message?’

Beesely waved away the others. ‘Can we have a private moment?’ He waited, easing closer to Otto. ‘We now know who visited this place in 1964 and set the booby-traps.’ Otto waited. Beesely made strong eye contact, their faces close. ‘Gunter!’

Otto slowly straightened, staring down at Beesely. He ran his hands through his hair and turned around, taking several deep breaths. Turning back and lowering his gaze to Beesely he quietly said, ‘And the world is coming to see his dirty work.’

‘*Our ... dirty work. We could take the blame for this, the bank.*’

Otto shook his head. ‘If nothing, Gunter was very thorough. I suspect he left no trail.’

‘Johno has found some evidence, so bring some sharp edged assets closer. We may need to contain this.’

Otto nodded as Beesely raised his phone. Beesely said, ‘Get me Mister Grey, please.’

‘Beesely, this is Grey. You wanted me, sir?’

‘Yes, we may have a containment situation.’

‘Sir?’

‘Some of the old assets inside, we do not want the Czech authorities having a look at. Our eyes only.’

‘Understood, sir.’

‘Stand ready to blow it. Thoroughly. Make sure our people are the first in there.’

‘Will do, sir. Oh, got some news on that metal door.’

‘Yes?’

‘Tempered steel. Could take a week to burn through without specialist kit, like plasma cutters.’

‘Keep at it, try the walls - no blasting, Johnno is on the other side. Besides, what’s on the other side may go bang, understand?’

‘Yes, sir. We’ll order plasma cutters, but that may be tomorrow morning. But I had an idea, sir. On this old concrete, high-pressure water cutters might do the trick.’

‘I’ll leave it to you, work round the clock, ask for anything you need.’

‘Yessir. And Mr. Stanton is in Prague, sir. Said to tell you he is *pressing the flesh*.’

Are we nearly there yet?

1

Twenty metres deeper into the tunnel they again heard Steak, but the little bear did not sound as if he was getting any closer. Or any less hungry. They emerged into another chamber, identical in dimensions to the last one, only this time they found a metal door leading off to the right, the main tunnel heading straight on. They lifted their lamps into the tunnel's continuation, unable to see any end to it or any other discerning features.

'Let's try the doorway first,' Johno suggested, coughing in the damp air.

The door itself was missing, just a frame remaining, before more of the same style of chiselled tunnel the other side. They checked the metal frame carefully, digging their feet into the dirt and checking for traps or wires. It seemed clear. This new side tunnel stretched for ten yards before ending with a rotten wooden door.

Again they kicked up the dirt and checked for wires, peering through cracks in the wood as best they could; no wires visible. Johno ran a numb finger around the edges, finding nothing. The door opened towards them so he gently widened the gap, big enough to put an arm inside, reaching through with his lamp. With Thomas holding his lamp behind himself Johno used the backlight of his lamp to check for booby traps.

The rotten door was almost see-through, revealing no sign of anything dangerous attached to it. Johno opened it fully and peered along the continuation of the tunnel, finding that the tunnel ended after a few yards and turned sharp right. They pressed slowly on, carefully negotiating

the corner before opening into a huge chamber, stepping into the middle with their lamps held high.

‘Wow!’ Thomas exclaimed. ‘It’s a rocket-bomb!’

‘Doodle-bug,’ Johno corrected. ‘V1’

The cavernous new room stretched out in front of them with similar dimensions to those above, and enclosed at both ends by the exact same style of metal doors.

‘This ain’t the way out,’ Johno admitted with a sigh. ‘This is torture chamber number two.’

Thomas ran to the metal doors on the right and grabbed the padlock. ‘Same,’ echoed around the chamber. He trotted quickly the opposite way, Johno examining the German V1. ‘This one is open!’

‘Don’t touch anything!’ Johno snapped, hobbling quickly over. Holding up his lamp he could see wires the other side of the door. ‘Wires.’ He let his shoulders drop, breathing out loudly.

‘The other tunnel is the way out,’ Thomas adamantly suggested, coughing also now.

Johno turned, sighing with fatigue and closing his eyes for a moment. ‘C’mon.’ In great pain he hobbled slowly back into the tunnel, winching with every step, his pain unseen by his young charge. Back in the second small chamber they turned right and lifted their lamps.

‘It looks a long way,’ Thomas noted, trying – and failing – not to make it sound like a complaint.

‘Stay behind me.’

In the cold air they laboured slowly down the tunnel, soon sloshing through an inch of cold water, the two of them loudly splashing along as a few rats scurried away. Fifty yards in Johno stopped, shaking his lamp. They had enough paraffin for maybe an hour, if his body held up. But the pain was growing, so to the stiffness in his legs,

his knees not quite so keen on co-operating with his brain and his feet numb with the cold. Another fifty yards brought a right turn, a zigzag and a left turn, Johno shaking his head and starting to doubt himself.

Getting colder with every step they were getting soaked from drips off the tunnel roof. They pressed on, their feet immersed in cold water up to their ankles now, both of them hacking loud coughs down the tunnel.

Another fifty yards brought them to yet another metal door. Johno turned, only to find Thomas shivering. 'Soon be there,' he encouraged. A blast of warmer air caught his attention. Lifting his head he could feel the slight breeze on his face. Fumbling with a hand above his head he tapped the edge of a vent.

'You look very sick in the face,' Thomas noted through chattering teeth. 'And you walk as if you have a big shit coming.'

Johno tried to smile, his cold numb cheeks not fully cooperating. 'Step back a bit.'

Another metal door, another check for booby-traps - his brain was on autopilot. With badly focused eyes he peered through the gaps that the open door offered, a numb finger scraping around the edges; nothing, no traps. He kicked out at it, opening it forty-five degrees. Inching through he held up his lamp. A rock fall had filled in the tunnel many years earlier.

Summoning every bit of strength he had Johno turned to the boy, whose life was now in his hands. He put a hand on Thomas's shoulder and breathed out loudly. 'I'm going to need you to be strong for me,' he quietly stated, his words distorted by his own shivers. Thomas just stood and shivered, looking back up through tired eyes. 'We can't go out this way, we have to go back ... to the house.'

The boy simply lowered his head and turned, sloshing slowly back along the tunnel, Johnno following close behind.

Thirty minutes later they were back at the house, Thomas's lamp empty, Johnno's almost empty. Using candlelight Johnno quickly refuelled his lamp, both of them now shivering uncontrollably. With the lamp lighting the room he faced Thomas.

'OK, now listen. I'm going to teach you some survival training, OK?'

Thomas nodded, his arms folded tightly for extra warmth.

'First, we make a big fire.' He coughed and breathed loudly, starting to rasp. 'Then we ... take off the wet clothes and dry them in here ... over the fire ... put up some string or use the chairs. One does one task, then his mate - his '*oppo*' - does the other. So first, wet clothes off, fire started.'

He helped Thomas take off his jacket, beginning to undress himself as Thomas started a fresh fire with books from the cabinet. The literary antiques were soon roaring, their inner pages perfectly dry. Wood from a broken chair added to the combustible material available as Johnno painfully took off his shoes and socks, all now soaking wet.

The backs of chairs offered good clothes-rails upon which to put the wet socks, the shoes placed on their sides on the mantle-piece. With the mouldy old curtains drawn and the internal door closed the room warmed up quickly, Thomas starting to boil water in a tin hung on a chair leg. Down to their underwear they wrapped stinking old cloth around themselves and sat making tea on the cold floor.

'You are bleeding,' Thomas pointed out.

‘I know. It’s not much, I’m too cold to bleed.’

Their ‘brew’ took a long ten minutes. Holding the warm cups in both hands felt good, greatly appreciated along with the warm, sugary black tea; there were no more powdered milk sachets and just another two tea bags remaining.

With the effect of the tea and sugar kicking in Johno put his damp shoes on. ‘I need to get them to drop some supplies.’ He clambered awkwardly upright. ‘You stay warm.’

Thomas nodded, his eyes half closed.

Wrapped in thin cloth Johno felt the chill immediately he stepped across the threshold and into the street, turning right and walking as quickly as he could shuffle along. He ducked through the first door, stepping briskly across to the middle of the office cavern – little care now for the huge pile of skeletons – and grabbed the radio. ‘Room service,’ he croaked.

‘Johno?’

‘Yeah, listen up. I need you to drop a Tetanus booster and a medical kit with antibiotic injections and more food and tea bags, urgently.’

‘Your injuries are getting bad? You sound like shit.’

‘Thomas’s health is not good, we’re both in trouble down here.’ He coughed painfully for several seconds.

‘We are dropping things down now, but it will take some time to get the medical supplies.’

A Mars Bar whacked him on the head. Cursing he bent down and got a Twix on the back. ‘Fuck.’ A soft packet of teabags landed on his shoulder and tumbled before he caught them. A dozen sugar sachets snowed down and littered the floor, followed by powdered milk and a dozen packets of glucose tablets.

A flash of light was followed by a pen-torch bouncing off a skeleton. Johnno picked it up and turned it off. 'Handy.'

He pressed TRANSMIT. 'I'm going back to check on Thomas, and we'll probably sleep. I'll try and come back in a few hours for the medical stuff, wrap it and drop it.'

A Rollo bounced off his head. As he hobbled away the sounds of dozens of things falling echoed quietly around the cavern. By time he reached the door he figured they had dropped enough chocolate there for several days of hyper-activity. It caused a smile, surprising himself at the simple movement of his cold face.

Thomas was sat dozing.

'Hey! Wake up!' The boy opened his eyes. 'First, get the heat back in your body, then some food, then you can sleep.' He checked his watch: 2am. Considering what they had gone through it was a miracle the boy was conscious at all.

Rollos were stuffed down quickly, another brew made by a very slow moving Thomas as Johnno threw two damp old mattresses down the narrow stairs. Some equally damp and smelly sheets followed. With the drop-leaf table moved into the window bay, and most of the wooden chairs smashed up for firewood, their 'front room' now afforded plenty of space. Johnno stood the sofa on its end before laying the mattresses side-by-side, dumping the damp sheets on top.

The little-and-large socks were mostly dry and appreciated on the cold stone floor. Their shoes were steaming, their clothes would take longer. With his 'Ghandi' robes wrapped around him Johnno retrieved some thick logs from the ironmongers two doors down. Six logs were soon piled up next to the fire, one put onto the fire.

The fireguard from the back room was retrieved. As soon as it was placed down the warmth felt directly from the fire's flames dropped significantly.

'I can sleep now?' Thomas asked in a faint voice.

'Yeah, the mattress closest to the fire. Put the blankets over you. They smell like shit, *and* they're damp, but they'll still keep you warm with the fire going.'

As Johno watched, his young charge fell asleep a millisecond after lying down. He put the blankets over the lad and adjusted them for maximum warmth as he lit up.

'You asleep?' he shouted. Nothing, the kid was well out of it, he considered.

A scratch at the door made him smile. He quietly lifted up and opened their front door for the bear. 'Dirty stop out!' he whispered, letting the bear in. Helped by Johno the bear cub wolfed down several chocolate bars before smelling Thomas and the blankets at length, curling up between the boy's mattress and the fire.

'So, all the family here,' he whispered, taking a long drag. 'Not quite how I pictured it. And I was figuring on a cat or dog, not a fucking bear. But hey, this is the Beesely family, so why not a fucking bear - everything else is crazy around here. We're in a make-believe house, in a cave, built by Germans, full of dead Russians and kitted with priceless memorabilia by Gunter, who's wife was fucked by my dad. Yep, just about as fucked up as you can get.' He blew out smoke and smiled at the surreal setting.

2

A knock on Beesely's bedroom door was answered by Otto. 'Mister Stanton. Please, come in.'

Beesely eased himself up and met Oliver in the middle of the room with a tired smile and a handshake.

‘Looking tired, Beesely.’

‘Old age.’

Otto closed the door on two of Stanton’s bodyguards, now stood next to two K2 guards.

‘Perhaps,’ Olly suggested with a scowl, ‘it’s the trouble you manage to find?’

‘Could well be.’ Beesely gestured Oliver to a seat, Otto pouring out three teas.

‘So,’ Oliver sighed. ‘What’s the latest?’

‘A serious problem.’

‘Oh?’

‘Gunter.’

‘Gunter?’ Oliver puzzled, a deep frown taking hold.

‘He was here, around 1964. Place is stacked full with priceless German wartime memorabilia which, according to Otto, is right up Gunter’s street.’

‘Why’d he leave it here, abandon it like that?’

‘Don’t know. And that’s what’s worrying us. So far we have a German installation - no doubt grabbed by the Russians in 1945, probably German uranium powder ready for their dirty bomb, which then became a Russian dirty-bomb site and possibly training ground for their agents. Then someone killed them all, probably Stalin, sealed the entrance and concreted up the bombs. Ten years later Gunter discovers it, stuffs it full of memorabilia and then abandons it.’

‘Jesus, what a puzzle.’ Stanton sipped his tea. ‘First, how the hell did Gunter get regular access to the Czech Republic?’

Otto answered, ‘We are investigating carefully. Gunter was a very rich man in 1964, so maybe he offered money

to the Russians for travel permits, and he probably had a Swiss diplomatic passport. In fact, I am certain he did.'

'OK, maybe I buy that,' Stanton said, staring into his tea. 'But how the hell did he ship German memorabilia like a damn ME163 across to it from Germany? In 1946 an ME163 was like a Stealth Fighter today - damn valuable! Russians would have loved to get hold of it, only a few recovered intact.'

'It's a puzzle,' Beesely sighed.

'Unless,' Otto began, 'the ME163 and other equipment was already in the Czech Republic.'

Oliver wagged a finger. 'Or in the hands of a Russian regional commander, someone on the make.'

'Might make sense,' Beesely agreed. 'Russians grabbed trophies, just like your lot. But I doubt that they could have hidden an ME163 and a mini-sub in a known bomb factory.'

'The odd thing is why the Russians abandoned it,' Oliver mused.

'Just the *one* odd thing?' Beesely quipped, cocking an eyebrow.

Stanton eased upright. 'So what happens if the Czech authorities find some evidence that the collection is Gunter's? They take it, sure, but do they attack the Swiss ... or your bank ... because he knew about it, about the sites significance and the bodies ... and didn't report it?'

Beesely offered an open palm. 'Very little that happened forty years ago will make it to the modern courts.'

'The biggest problem,' Otto interjected, 'will be the symmetry. They will think we knew, and came for Gunter's collection. If anyone else had found it ... anyone.'

Stanton nodded. 'Yep ... I see the problem. Current owner *just happens* to find collection of prior owner. Like Nixon finding those tapes and handing them in,' Oliver said with a smile.

'My fear is ... what else is down there?' Beesely said.

'A lot of surprises so far,' Oliver agreed. 'Could be a sting in the tail.'

'We're ready to blow it,' Beesely informed him. 'Making use of your guys, if that's alright?'

'Of course it is, you don't need to ask.'

'So, how we play this is ... have a look, get Johnno and Thomas out, and if we find something we don't like ... accidental cave in. After all, place is full of munitions.'

'That's the one good thing that you've going for you,' Oliver agreed.

'Staying here?'

'No, Embassy. Have some work to do anyway, dangling a few carrots, bit of pressure on their President.'

Beesely mockingly blinked. 'To help little old me?'

'Don't under-value yourself, old man. Or get modest, it would confuse me after all these years.' They laughed.

* * *

Otto woke Beesely at 6am, just as it started getting light. Two breakfast trays were delivered as Beesely quickly showered, Otto tucking into his omelette.

'Any progress?' Beesely asked as he emerged in a robe. He sat down opposite Otto and poured a tea.

'Some. The plasma cutters will be here today and enhanced cutting torches. During the night guards attacked the concrete walls with tools, making some progress, but very difficult to work in the suits. Some men collapsed.'

Beesely looked up. 'They're alright?'

'Yes. Heat exhaustion.'

'Are we still looking for another entrance?' Beesely asked as he buttered toast.

'Yes, but we have scaled down. There are now Czech soldiers everywhere.'

Beesely again looked up. 'Soldiers?'

Otto nodded. 'Part of an inner exclusion area.'

'Will we get back in?' Beesely asked with a quick tip of his eyebrows.

'I think so, yes. But we will go by helicopter anyway. Wilhelm is here.'

Beesely stopped, glancing at his watch. 'Now?'

'Arrived a short while ago.'

Beesely added Marmalade to the toast. 'Must have been up early. Let's meet him and fly him in with us.'

'And a Russian delegation is in Prague, driving here now.'

'Russian press gave them a nudge, eh? Any word on them identifying the cave?'

'They have already said they have no knowledge of it.'

'Doubt they will reveal its purpose anyway,' Beesely sighed. He munched his toast. 'You sleep well?'

'Yes. I was very tired, so quick to sleep.'

Beesely made eye contact. 'Anything on Gunter?'

Otto lowered his head for a moment. 'He was a secret man, very private. There have been many rumours about many things in the last twenty years, not so much the evidence.'

'So no hard evidence of him coming here in K2 records?'

'I have to work very carefully, even inside K2. Only certain people can work on this.'

Beesely nodded his understanding. 'If he came here regularly then he must have stayed somewhere nearby, some hotel. No helicopters in those days.'

'I have already a team checking all old records.'

'Good. When we get access to that camper van, let's fingerprint it and check the license plate. If there is one.'

Otto forced a thin smile. 'Then maybe have an accident with a bomb.'

'Accidents happen in caves full of munitions.' Beesely immediately regretted saying it, his features saddening.

'Johno will get out. He is very good.'

Beesely forced a quick smile.

3

Johno woke with a start from a bad dream, finding their lounge dark except for the dull orange glow from the fire, the room still warm. He coughed long and hard, his chest tight, before checking his watch: 9am, he had been asleep seven hours.

Something glistening on the floor caught his attention, two needles and a few vials. He smiled. 'Well done, lad,' he whispered, glancing around their lounge. Steak lay by the fire, but there was no sign of Thomas. 'Thomas?' he shouted.

Nothing came back as Steak stirred. Johno wrestled his aching body to his feet and coughed. 'Thomas!'

Only silence greeted him. The street welcomed him with the same blackness, a gentle chilling breeze, the oddly distorted sounds of water drops from the shadows. Shining the pen-torch to check where he stepped Johno eased further into the street. 'Thomas!'

Concerned now he hobbled as quickly as he could back inside. His trousers were dry and he screamed with agony as he pulled them on, frightening Steak. Next he forced his shoes on by stamping into the slip-ons. His shirt was now dry, but took a long minute to try and button up with stiff fingers. The jacket was still damp but he threw it on and lit a lamp, turning up the wick. He stuffed his pistol into a jacket pocket, threw the rope over a shoulder and headed out into the street.

‘Thomas!’

He listened intently. Nothing, just the rhythmical and monotonous drip of water somewhere in the shadows. The entrance to the lower levels lay across from him at an angle, through the school. Would Thomas have gone down exploring? Would he be near the radio?

He turned right and headed quickly for the radio, through the wooden door and then along half the length of the office room. Grabbing it he quickly shouted, ‘Hello? You there?’

‘Yes,’ crackled back. ‘This is Simon.’

‘I’ve lost Thomas.’

‘Lost him?’

‘When did you talk with him last?’

‘About an hour ago. We sent down the injections in the night. You got them OK?’

‘Yeah, but now he’s wandered off. He may’ve had an accident or got stuck somewhere.’

‘He was OK when I spoke to him,’ Simon offered.

‘I’ll get back to you, I’m going to search.’ He quickly headed to the tank room, ducking painfully and awkwardly under the broken door and hobbling quickly through the memorabilia.

‘Thomas!’

Nothing, there were no signs of him. He pressed on, through the hole at the bottom of the next metal doors, crawling through the wet sand and into the clock room.

‘Thomas!’

No reply came, just a ghostly tinkling as the breeze oscillated the remaining chandeliers. Crunching quickly through glass he reached the far end and stopped at the open doors. ‘Thomas?’ He kept going, past the camper van and to the booby-trapped doors, stopping and turning. In the cold air he could feel the sweat on his forehead chilling him.

‘Thomas!’ he screamed with as much energy as he had left, the words echoing and distorting many times, diminishing in strength as they dissipated along the length of the complex.

He hobbled quickly back, taking the time and effort to clamber painfully onto the tank and check inside - just in case the boy had gone inside and gotten stuck. No sign of him. He banged his elbow and jarred his knee on the way down, his adrenalin suppressing the pain for the moment.

Ducking back under the door to the office he crawled through an ice-cold puddle and forced himself upright. Every ground level office got checked. No sign. Back in the village he checked the schoolrooms and shouted down the secret passage, waiting as the cool breeze robbed him of valuable body heat. Deciding to check this level first he hobbled to the little cottage and checked the single room quickly.

Next, the ironmongers. He stepped in with the lamp, shocked upright by a pitiful and loud cry from Steak, loyally sat next Thomas on the floor. Johno jumped in and knelt, ignoring the extreme pain now coming from his

legs. Cradling the boy's head he checked for breathing, placing a hand across his chest and stomach.

He was alive, just unconscious. It could have been fatigue or hypothermia, Johnno considered. With both hands he checked the boy's head, running his fingers down the outside of the skull and symmetrically checking. He found a small bump, some dampness; the boy had slipped on the grimy floor and hit his head.

Johnno carefully lifted Thomas, screaming with pain from his knee, and eased the boy's limp body out of the ironmonger's head first and towards their house. On the mattress he quickly checked for any other injuries, satisfied that Thomas had just hit his head. In the bright light of a lamp the bump was examined; a slight cut, no sign of a skull fracture.

With great care and tenderness Johnno turned the boy over and into the standard recovery position; a knee up and hand under face, head tipped back. He checked the boy's pulse. It beat strong enough, so he hobbled outside and to the radio, a curious Steak in tow.

'Hello!'

'Yes?' crackled Simon's voice.

'Have you got any smelling salts?'

'Wait, there is a doctor here - in fact, dozens.'

'Dozens?' Johnno quietly repeated to himself.

Thirty seconds later a clatter from above resulted in a packet hitting a skeleton. Johnno grabbed and opened it, a small vial wrapped in tissue. With vigour he hobbled back to their new home.

'Try this, sleepy head.' He prised the top off with a thumb and waved it under Thomas's nose for several seconds. The lad coughed and shook his head, his eyes opening a moment later.

‘Don’t move, you hit your head when you went to the ironmongers,’ Johnno whispered. ‘Out cold for almost an hour, nothing serious.’

Thomas groaned and reached for his head.

‘Yep, it’s going to hurt. Stay here and lie still, I’m going to get the kettle on, you’re cold.’

After a cup of tea with five sugar sachets in Thomas was feeling better.

‘Normally, in these cases,’ Johnno quietly began, ‘you’d have a nice shiny ambulance and a check up, but we ain’t got that luxury today. So you’re going to have to tough it out.’

‘I’m OK,’ came a weak voice.

‘Good, ‘cause I need you to do something for me.’

‘What?’

‘Stay awake!’ Johnno roared. Then softer, ‘Make sure you don’t go back to sleep. Eat chocolate, glucose bars, have tea and stay the fuck awake!’ He stood.

‘Where are you going?’

‘To blow down some fucking doors. I’m going to close this door and lock the bag of shit in here with you. When you hear some loud bangs don’t worry - the British Army is on the case. Which means we’ll probably miss the first time, but ... we’ll get there in the end.’

Thomas forced a weak smile as Johnno left.

The Panzer-Faust Johnno grabbed were sixty years old, but the mechanism was very simple; a simple explosive charge to lob the ‘head’, the dangerous end detonating when it hit something solid, in particular the Sherman tank they were stacked near. He took three and slid them under the door, grabbing another three before he crawled through the wet sand. Dragging several boxes out to the

centre of the camper van room he stacked them as an improvised shield.

‘Here goes nothing.’

He pulled out the safety pin, aimed the bulbous end towards the booby-trapped door and fired. Nothing. He threw it across the room with anger. Next one. No good, also thrown across the room.

Third time lucky, he considered. Safety pin out, aim up for a lob shot, pulled the trigger. Bang. Followed a second later by a louder bang as the anti-armour shaped charge went off against the door.

Then he remembered to duck. ‘Shit!’

Two loud explosions echoed around the cavern; grenades. He eased his head up, lifting his lamp as decades of accumulated dust drifted down onto him. He could make out a jagged hole as he coughed. Unfortunately, it punctured the doors six foot high. Breathing out loudly and cursing he grabbed the next Panzer-Faust and fired. Small bang, duck this time, louder bang.

He lifted back up, falling dust bathing his face; he had to blink several times to clear his eyes. When the smoke had cleared another hole became evident, two foot in diameter and three feet off the ground.

‘Thank God for German engineering!’

He rushed at the door, sliding into it and thrusting his head through with the pen torch and finding a narrowing tunnel, some boxes and then just rocks and rubble. This was the main entrance, collapsed by Gunter he considered. He sighed, but at least he had found and eliminated it.

Collecting the two remaining weapons he returned to their box and grabbed another four of the light Panzer-Fausts, carrying them under the broken doors and through the office room to the village. He placed them carefully

down and hobbled into the house, knocking before he entered.

‘Who is it?’ came a soft voice.

‘The big bad wolf.’ He sat and faced Thomas, the boy now slumped on a mattress and nibbling chocolate. ‘How you feeling, kid?’

‘OK,’ Thomas insisted, looking a little drowsy.

‘Keep the cuppas and chocolate going, stay awake.’

‘What did you do?’

‘I blew a hole in that far door, the one with the wires.’

Thomas’s eyes widened. ‘What was there?’

‘The main entrance, the one that was filled in with rocks that the old man told us about in Beesely’s office.’

‘You look like the skel-ee-tons outside.’

‘Thanks a lot, fucker. You’re bedside manner needs work. You injected me?’

‘The doctor man on the radio told me what to do, so I jabbed you in the arse. One centimetre of liquid of each needle, no air bubbles.’

Johno smiled as best he could. ‘Let’s hope it did the trick.’

‘What will we do now?’

‘Now I’ll blow up the other door downstairs, see where it goes.’ He stood.

‘Be careful,’ came a quiet and pleading voice.

‘Don’t worry, I wasn’t born - I was made!’

The journey back down to the lower level was arduous, Johno stopping for breath, the energy gone from his body. By time he emerged into the large cavern on the lower level he was exhausted and chilled, his socks and shoes soaked again.

First, the door without booby-traps. He hid behind a metal chest and aimed; safety off, squeeze the trigger.

Bang! He ducked. A loud echo knocked dust and small rocks from the ceiling, pinging off metal. With a laboured dragging of his leg he rushed towards the door through thick swirls of dust and smoke, finding a hole around two foot square. He placed the lamp through and then his head, suddenly wishing he hadn't.

‘Fuck ... me!’

Without any hesitation he clambered through and straightened, staring up. ‘Dear ... God!’

Hitler's decisive weapon

1

Johno stood and stared. This massive new room housed a tall rocket, chequered with black and white squares - a German ballistic missile, only guessed about by Allied Intelligence during the Second World War. It stood proudly erect, reaching up some eighty feet tall, and was supposed to be able to hit New York or Moscow, he remembered. The tail fins themselves were thirty feet tall and the width of a small house.

‘Shit!’ he slowly let out.

He cranked his neck back and peered upwards into the gloom that surrounded the unseen nose section, wobbling and almost falling backwards. Shaking his head in disbelief he kicked a nearby barrel. It was full. So was the next one, and the one besides that. They were all full, full of something that a rocket made use of; fuel and explosive payload.

‘Christ!’ He had just blown a hole in the door.

His phone beeped, caused him to jump. He breathed heavily, cursing, having long since forgotten it was in his jacket. Then it hit him. Holding the phone he slowly lifted his gaze, noting several tiny stars of light. The launch roof must be retractable, and thin metal, he considered. He pressed green. ‘This is Johno!’

‘Operations here, sir. Are you out?’ came a pleasant and detached female voice.

‘No, still stuck inside, but I found somewhere with a thin roof. Zero in on my GPS and get some digging equipment and burning torches. In fact, forget the torches – there’re enough explosives down here to take the top of

the fucking mountain off. Tell Beesely I've found a rocket, all lined up and ready to go.'

'Will do, sir. I have your GPS position.'

'Give it to Simon, tell him to run to it and jump up and down.'

'One moment, sir.'

As he waited he walked around the rocket, noting the train tracks half buried in dirt. A metal stairwell climbed around the concrete walls of the silo, but it had seen better days. Running a hand across it caused powered rust to fall off by the bucket full.

'Johno?' came a man's voice.

'Yeah?'

'It's Simon. I am at the GPS position, but no air vent!'

'Jump up and down ya great fat lump!'

He waited, straining to listen. Nothing could be heard, but something started falling down and making a 'ting' noise off the stairs.

'You're directly above me, but be careful, you're on the roof of a missile silo. If you go through it's a hundred foot drop to a shit load of explosives that'll blow you right back up faster than you came down. Rope yourself to something twenty yards away and start digging. Carefully! Understand?'

'Yes.'

'Good. Now get off the line. Operations?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I want a bomb disposal team, twenty men familiar with Second World War ordnance.' He struggled for breath. 'I want a doctor and a medic that are physically fit - no one comes down here who is not fit and well clothed, understand?' He coughed hard.

'Yes, sir.'

‘Then I want a hundred body bags and one coffin, good quality, very good quality, and I want it down here as fast as possible. No, coffin in the chateau will do. When Simon breaks through he’ll need ropes, thirty or forty metres. I want climbing experts to rappel down the ropes.’ He forced a breath. ‘Then they’ll need to lift me and Thomas up.’

‘Understood, sir.’

A ‘ting’ sound caught his attention, small flakes of rusted metal starting to hit his head, so he hobbled back towards the hole in the metal door, the sounds growing. Then a loud ‘glang’ echoed from high above, followed by the first burst of light.

‘Yeah baby!’ He lifted the phone. ‘Simon?’

‘One moment, sir.’

‘This is Simon.’

‘I can see light!’ He could hear a cheer go up. ‘Be careful, you’ll come crashing through the metal.’

‘It’s rusty. Above it is maybe six centimetres of soil. I can see the metal, so now we are clearing a hole.’

A burst of light illuminated the rocket for the first time in sixty years, this desperate piece of German engineering glistening in the welcoming light, Johno temporarily blinded and unable to look up after two days in the dark.

A rope pack hit the floor some five yards from him, followed a few seconds later by the fast rappel down of a medic. The man unclipped and ran straight to Johno, the room now light by daylight. ‘You OK, sir?’ came a Swiss accented voice.

‘No, but we’ll have to wait till we get the boy.’

Another body came down the rope and quickly unclipped. Simon.

‘Simon, grab the bolt here, open the door!’

The three of them eased the rusted bolts and opened the door as two more men appeared behind. The large metal door groaned and resisted before finally giving up its secrets after sixty years and opening a few feet.

‘OK, everyone, watch for booby-traps, trip wires, explosives – there’re bombs everywhere. Don’t ... touch anything!’

An American accent came from behind. ‘We’re bomb disposal.’

Johno turned and stared wide-eyed. ‘American?’

‘Yessir. Part of the decon’ team upstairs.’

‘Well ... first make an assessment of that rocket and these barrels, we’ll be back in five minutes, then out. After that you can make safe.’

‘Yessir.’

‘Rest of you, on me!’ He hobbled as best he could, back down the tunnels, the men’s helmet lights helping. At the small cavern they halted.

‘Someone stay here, this skeleton has to be guarded, it’s very important,’ Johno softly ordered. A bomb disposal man stayed guard as Johno led the way on, around the bend and through the joining tunnel, slowly clanking up the spiral staircase and through the school to the village street.

‘Fuck ... me!’ Simon exclaimed as he took in the village. The medic stopped dead, even more stunned than the sight of the rocket.

Johno limped into the house. ‘Anyone home?’

‘Only us rats,’ came a quiet voice.

‘Cavalry is here,’ Johno said with a beaming smile.

Simon stuck his head in. ‘Thomas?’

With renewed energy Thomas jumped up, as did Steak - sniffing the newcomers.

‘Get him topside,’ Johno firmly ordered. ‘On the double!’

The medic pushed in as Simon led Thomas outside, soon following them, Johno bringing up the rear with little Steak. Green light-sticks were now laid out along the floor and forming a trail and they quickly retraced their steps, passing more bomb disposal men coming in. In the rocket silo quite a crowd had gathered, equipment being lowered down, gas detectors and Geiger counters being swung around.

‘You’re clean, sir,’ a man said after a cursory check of Johno with a Geiger counter.

‘I’d have to argue the case with you there, mate,’ Johno quipped. ‘Right, harness for the boy!’

‘Here, sir.’

Many eager hands quickly dressed Thomas in a harness and he shot upwards a moment later. ‘Don’t forget Steak!’ wafted down.

‘Steak?’ Simon queried.

‘The bear cub,’ Johno explained. ‘We call him Steak.’ They stared at him. ‘Because I was planning on eating him, no other food down here.’

‘Your turn now, sir.’

‘Not yet. Get a body bag down here, something to do before I go. And someone grab that damn bear!’

Simon radioed up, a body bag lowered down a minute later. ‘What do we do with this?’ he asked as he retrieved it.

‘Come with me.’

In the small cavern Johno laid out the bag and reverently moved the remains across, breaking the rusty old chains. The skeleton was zipped up, Johno taking a moment to catch his breath.

‘Who was it?’ Simon quietly asked.

‘That’s private,’ Johnno stated. He lifted his head and made eye contact with Simon through the gloom. Between them they lifted the light plastic body bag and carried it to the silo.

‘Headgear off!’ Johnno shouted as they entered, his words echoing around the massive enclosure. The K2 men did as asked, the puzzled Americans a moment later. ‘I’ll go up first, then the lady.’

‘Lady?’ many voices repeated, puzzled looks at the light body bag.

The harness was fixed and Johnno started upwards, his progress nowhere near as fast as that of his young charge, not least because of an extra four kilos of crying bear cub. The harness digging into him rapidly became agony, but he could see light, and the way out, an involuntary smile taking charge of his face.

‘Never ... again.’

2

With eyes firmly shut he was grabbed and manhandled to one side and unclipped.

‘Jesus, Johnno!’ came a voice he recognised, a guard he knew. A pair of sunglasses were placed onto his face, Steak handed to a surprised and perplexed guard.

Only then did Johnno open his eyes a fraction, still squinting against the bright sun. He waited for the body bag, accepting a lukewarm coffee and half a sandwich.

‘I’m a doctor, sir,’ came a voice.

‘In the chateau, mate. I have shrapnel wounds in the arse. It’ll need surgery, the bits are still in there.’

‘You’ll need to go to hospital, sir, in Switzerland. I’ll call ahead.’

Johno squinted through the trees at the crowd and their numerous uniforms; Czech, Russian, German, American. ‘What the fuck’s been going on up here - United Nations peace keeping force?’

The doctor explained, ‘The significance of the complex and the bodies. Herr Beesely has been getting them together. Many want it to be declared a war grave, some want the bodies back.’

‘Christ,’ Johno muttered, the body bag emerging into the light. ‘K2 men! Body detail!’ Four men ran over. ‘Head gear off,’ Johno quietly insisted.

They grabbed four corners, Johno leading the way down through the forest, the path now a well-worn track. Noticing the body bag most of the soldiers removed their caps and lowered their heads, some up-ended the rifles and placed the barrels on boots respectfully.

A guard ran over and whispered in Johno’s ear, ‘Herr Beesely says to be politically correct on the surface, surprise visitors.’

Johno puzzled that statement as he laboured on.

The path to the road cut through mostly bushes and not thick trees, not particularly difficult going. But Johno was in no hurry, he had a heavy burden to bear. He stopped men rushing by and waved them to the side as he hobbled along, leading the bag steadfastly onwards.

At the roadside a line of Range Rovers were pulling up. He recognised Blaum jumping down, followed by the German Minister, Wilhelm. Then came Beesely and Otto, a Russian General and another man, a senior officer in a uniform he did not immediately recognise. Thomas now sat on the grass, being examined by several fussing

medics. He did not look happy. Seeing Johnno he jumped up and ran across. They linked up as if father and son.

Those people who had been grouped by the roadside took off their headgear and lowered their heads, followed by the Russians and the other officers. The Russians pointed, loudly asking what nationality the body was as Beesely and Otto neared.

‘Swiss,’ Johnno answered, stopping next to the Russian. He thrust out a dirty hand, the General grasping it. ‘Your people, all you people, will be brought out.’ He forced a breath. ‘They’ve waited a long time, a few more minutes won’t make much difference.’ A man to his side translated, the General bowing his head in thanks.

Beesely stepped closer. ‘Dear God, Johnno,’ he let out, looking horrified at his son’s condition, Otto equally concerned.

‘Don’t worry,’ Johnno said with half a smile. ‘I wasn’t born, I was – apparently - made.’

‘And well made too,’ Beesely commended. He put a hand on Thomas. ‘You OK?’ The boy nodded.

Otto looked past Johnno and at the bag, carried now by four sombre guards. ‘Who is in the bag? The cave climber?’

‘No,’ Johnno answered, glancing first at Beesely then at Otto. Beesely caught Johnno’s look, now concerned. Johnno explained, ‘The person in the bag was chained to a wall without much clothing ... and left to die in a cave under the complex. She was left a plate of food and a bottle of drink, left in the freezing dark - to die alone with just rats for company.’ Johnno took out the locket and handed it to Beesely, calling over two K2 guards and telling them to stand behind Otto.

Otto puzzled the strange move, glancing at the guards. 'Johno?'

Beesely went down quickly, grabbed by Johno and Thomas, the Russian General beside him a second later and helping. Beesely burst into tears, a strange, unnatural noise.

'Medic!' a guard called. Blaum rushed over and knelt.

Johno turned and motioned the bag down with a flat hand. Turning back he grabbed Otto strongly by the arm and around the neck, their faces close. Into his ear Johno whispered a long sentence. Otto faced the bag, his knees going out from under him a moment later, the guards helping him down.

'Will you move back for a minute please,' Johno asked of the onlookers. 'There're some people here collecting their dead.'

The crowd moved back to the road, Blaum staying with Beesely. Otto moved to where he could touch the bag, resting a hand on it as doctors tended Beesely. Beesely's eyes were moist and closed, his body shaking.

'Who is the woman?' Thomas asked, concerned now for both Beesely and Otto.

Johno straightened and took a long breath. Awkwardly he bent over and whispered in the boy's ear, 'She was Otto's mother, tortured and killed by Gunter and left in the cave to die.'

Thomas began to cry. With everything else that had happened he just lost it. The guards glanced at each other, not understanding.

Johno turned to them. 'You two, put Otto in a car. Now! Blaum, doctor, put Beesely in the car. Quickly, please, there're people watching.'

He addressed the guards next to the body bag. 'Put the body in another car, down to the chateau and then the coffin. C'mon, move it!'

When the orders had been carried out he hobbled along the track, his appearance and injuries the cause of many surprised looks. He signalled Wilhelm and the Russians towards him.

'Gentlemen, what happened during the war is long since over. What happened during the 1950s is also a part of a sad history.' The Russian assistant translated. 'What happened in this complex is of great historical significance, but that's just it - *it's historical*. There're many dead people down there, Russian and German scientists, men and women - people who once had families. Their identity is on their bodies, you should have no problem in identifying them.

'There's a lot of unexploded ordnance down there, not to mention any radiation. It'll take some time to make safe, then we'll bring up the bodies for you, with all due respect.'

The Russian assistant finished translating and the General thanked Johnno with a handshake, as did Wilhelm.

'We will go down the hill and wait,' Wilhelm offered, a nod at his Russian counter-part.

Johnno clambered painfully into a Range Rover with Otto, Beesely and Thomas. 'Driver! Go, quickly.' The vehicle turned and headed down the hill.

'So, all the Beesely clan here,' Johnno said with a sigh, stroking Steak - now sat on Thomas and keeping his eyes firmly shut. In the daylight Johnno could see just what poor health the cub was in.

‘My God, Johno,’ Otto whispered from behind moist eyes. ‘You look like you are dead.’ Beesely opened an eye.

‘Not far off it,’ Johno quietly answered, his voice breaking after two days of continuous damp air. ‘Another day or two would have finished me. Going to need a quick flight to hospital and surgery.’

‘You are hurt that bad?’ Otto whispered, leaning forwards and ignoring the horrendous smell.

Johno nodded and put a hand on Thomas. ‘You OK?’

‘Yes. I am learning to be the soldier,’ came a quiet croak. The words were stronger than the body.

Beesely tapped the boy’s leg. ‘If you take after Johno,’ he forced out in a whisper, ‘you’ll do well.’

The rest of the journey was made in silence, phone chirps ignored.

3

At the chateau Johno opened his eyes and squinted out of the car window. ‘Jesus! What the hell is all this?’

The grounds around the chateau were dotted with hundreds of people, soldiers and police. He recognised the American Army uniforms, the Chinooks, Czech soldiers and police, German Army officers, noting finally a group of Russian Army officers.

‘The world has come to see the complex,’ Otto quietly stated, glancing out of the window. ‘And the radiation has brought many of the Czech authorities here.’

‘Who came in the Chinooks?’ Johno croaked.

‘US Army decontamination team, same people as came to Zug,’ Otto softly informed him, barely above a

whisper. The energy had left his body. 'The Captain, he is here.'

'Shit,' Johnno let out.

Their vehicle pulled up next to a K2 helicopter with its rotors turning, its doors open. Guards opened the car doors and helped them down, practically carrying Johnno to the waiting helicopter. Without further words Johnno, Thomas and little Steak clambered into the rear, a doctor into the front.

With Otto and Beesely stood at the edge of the grass Johnno gave a lazy wave, gazing down as the helicopter gained altitude. It nosed forwards and sped away as he placed on a headset. 'That you Steffan?'

The pilot glanced over his shoulder. 'Christ, Johnno, you look like shit. And that smell! Is that the bear ... or you?'

Johnno cracked a smile. 'Straight to hospital, buddy. Quick as you can.'

The pilot glanced over his shoulder again. 'You hurting, buddy?'

'Big time.'

'Forty minutes, straight to Zurich. Hang on. Operations, this is Kilo Nine.'

'Kilo Nine, go ahead over,' came back a detached and professional female voice.

'Kilo Nine to operations, heading direct to Zurich, forty minutes. Have surgeons standing by for emergency procedures.'

'Kilo Nine, understood.'

* * *

Beesely and Otto forced down a little food, sat quietly in back of the chateau in a room full of camp beds for guards. Two men were asleep in the room, but Beesely did not seem to notice or care. The coffin rested in the corridor; an expensive, locally made piece with golden handles and a large wreath centred on top.

Simon, the senior guard, wandered in. 'Sorry, sir. May I collect my bag?' he asked.

'Of course,' Beesely quietly agreed with a wave of his hand.

Simon grabbed his kitbag as Blaum entered. Blaum sat, just staring, a sympathetic look offered.

Beesely caught the eye of Simon and waved him over. 'What's your name?'

'Simon, sir.'

'Sit down, please.' Otto slowly raised his head. Beesely asked Simon, 'What do the staff think about me, compared to Gunter?'

Blaum's brow furrowed as Simon shifted uneasily on his seat, not sure how to answer.

'Sir?' Simon asked.

'It is not a trick question, and I want the truth. How do the men compare me to Gunter?'

'They do not, sir, compare you. They like you, sir, and respect you a lot in what you have done. Gunter was not well liked, sir.' Simon glanced at Otto as he finished that sentence.

'What else do they say?' Beesely quietly pressed.

Simon shrugged. 'When you came to Zug everyone was surprised, sir. The Swiss, they do like the English so much. Not as bad as the Germans, but not so friendly. But they could see the new training with the British soldiers, sir, and they liked that. After the bomb in London they all

had the great respect for you and Johnno, sir. And after the big attack on Zug ... well, you stayed and fought with the men.'

'I have spoken with many of the guards,' Blaum quietly put in. 'They like the fact that K2 is now centre stage, that it is important and that *they* are important. They are part of something big, they are part of something respected and they feel that respect with a professional pride.'

Beesely nodded to himself as he thought. He faced Otto. Their eyes met for a moment, before Beesely turned back to Simon. 'The woman in the coffin is Otto's mother.'

Blaum straightened. Simon was visibly shocked.

'How can that be?' Blaum asked in a strong whisper.

Beesely quietly explained, his eyelids heavy, 'Gunter was married to Otto's mother, for a short while, but was not Otto's father. He knew that fact, which is probably why he chained her to the wall down there, in a cave, and left her to die. Around 1964 or 1965, not long after Otto was born.'

'Dear ... God,' Blaum let out, looking horrified.

'You may tell the men,' Beesely informed Simon. 'But no one outside K2 must ever know.' The guard stood, staring hard at the coffin as he left.

Blaum focused on Otto. 'You never knew her?'

Otto shook his head, a very slight movement.

'And that old bastard killed her,' Blaum quietly added, clearly angered.

'She has a grave, in Bern,' Otto stated, his voice breaking.

'A fake,' Beesely suggested.

'Must be,' Blaum added.

A guard knocked on the open door. 'Sir,' he quietly asked, Beesely raising his head. 'They are bringing the bodies out now, all going to the morgue in Prague for formal identification. The Russians and Germans are leaving for Prague, sir.'

4

Beesely and Otto sat on deckchairs an hour later, overlooking the stream and warming in the sun.

Simon approached. 'Sir?' Beesely lifted his head. Simon continued, 'The old man who informed us of the cave, he has been found dead. Murdered, sir, his throat cut.'

Beesely glanced at Otto. 'Someone not happy he brought us here?'

'There can be no other reason to cut the throat of an old man some small years from death.'

Beesely lifted his head to Simon. 'I want his house searched and a discreet investigation made. Do the Czech authorities know about his death?'

'Yes, sir. The Interior Minister, Novak, visited the man's house in the village today.'

Beesely stared wide-eyed at Otto. 'Since when have Interior Ministers visited crime scenes?'

'Something is not correct here.'

'A great many things are not correct here, especially this. Do we have anything on Novak?'

'He has a son in prison in Spain, Costa Del Sol,' Otto informed Beesely.

'I know the prison, hellish place. What charge is he on?'

‘Drug possession. He has been captured for six months. He waits a trial.’

‘And on the Costa Del Sol that can take four years, two at best,’ Beesely pointed out. He made eye contact with Simon. ‘Is the good Minister still here?’

Simon nodded. ‘Yes, sir.’

‘Ask him if we would be kind enough to meet with us in private.’ Beesely gazed back out over the pleasant vista as Simon withdrew.

‘What do you think is his connection?’ Otto asked.

‘Wish I knew. First, how did *he* know that we spoke to the local man? I suppose he could have found out that the local man travelled to Zug, but why kill him?’

‘If Gunter was alive, I could understand why he would kill the old man,’ Otto suggested.

‘Maybe Gunter left some money with a local firm, to watch the old man, kill him if he informs anyone about the cave.’

Otto considered it. ‘It is probable. If we are killed, money is transferred to such people. Maybe Gunter had this idea.’

‘Did you ever see him do such a thing?’

‘As I have said, he was a private man, secret about many things.’

‘Well, if Gunter’s in the dock, why pique the interest of the Czech Minister?’ Beesely thought out loud, a deep frown creasing his brow.

Minister Novak appeared, walking around the edge of the Chateau. Otto stood and pulled closer another deckchair.

‘Gentlemen,’ Novak coldly offered as he sat. He waited.

‘How are things with you, Minister?’ Beesely flatly asked.

‘I think, Mister Beesely, that you are not so interested in my health, or my business.’ Beesely stared back for a few seconds. Novak added, ‘Your people have been rescued, and yet you are still here.’

‘We are trying to help, Minister,’ Beesely flatly replied.

‘That is very kind of you. But the Americans are looking for further radiation, what can *you* do that our people cannot?’

‘A great deal, in many areas. I would have thought that was obvious by now.’ Beesely checked his nails.

‘For the moment my President is allowing you to be here, but when the cave is made safe there will be no reason for you to remain.’

‘Except this chateau, and the Spa we have bought, of course.’

Novak hesitated. ‘I was referring to the mountain.’

‘Which we are also trying to buy,’ Beesely pointed out.

‘It is park land, I have already checked.’

‘Really? Why ... did you enquire?’

‘So that no one should purchase land with such a dangerous complex underneath it. After all, we have to consider the safety of visitors.’

‘Of course,’ Beesely firmly, and mockingly, agreed. ‘Safety first!’

‘Was there anything else?’ Novak curtly asked.

‘Yes, quite a lot I’m afraid. We were just wondering why you visited a crime scene today.’

Novak did not react. ‘And why would such an event be of interest to you?’

‘Seems odd, for senior Minister to get involved with such a matter?’ Beesely probed.

‘That is a Czech matter. What is *your* interest?’

‘We knew the old man who died.’

‘Did you kill him?’ Novak asked with a slight smirk.

‘And odd question, Minister. When we kill people ... no one ever finds the body.’

Novak’s features hardened. ‘You are not in Switzerland now,’ he quietly but forcefully pointed out.

‘I was not referring to Switzerland. I was being general, as in ... the whole world.’

‘You seem to think you have a lot of influence and power, Mister Beesely.’

‘That’s because I do. And I wield it carefully, very carefully.’

‘How very noble of you. Was there anything else?’

‘Yes, your son,’ Otto put in.

Novak angered quickly, but controlled it. ‘My son?’

‘I understand he is in prison in Spain?’ Otto added.

‘You *are* well informed,’ Novak reluctantly admitted.

‘Sounds like he will be there a while,’ Beesely casually mentioned. ‘Spanish justice moves very slowly. And that prison on the Costa Del Sol generally leaves the inmates scared for life when they do, eventually, leave.’

‘Why are you mentioning this?’ Novak quietly, yet angrily demanded through clenched teeth.

‘Would you like the boy home this week?’ Otto offered.

Novak’s eyes widened, angered, before quickly softening. He lowered his gaze. ‘If it was my concern alone I would leave him there to rot.’

‘Does your wife, and family, agree with that sentiment?’ Beesely delicately enquired, again checking his fingernails.

Novak took in the view, facing away from them for ten seconds. Turning back to them he said, ‘What are you offering, and at what price?’

Beesely replied, ‘What we are offering is your boy back. The price ... is simply the truth.’

‘The truth?’ Novak repeated with a laugh. ‘I am surprised you do not know the truth, a man of *your means*.’

‘We *will* find out, it’s just a matter of time,’ Beesely quietly suggested. He waited.

Novak obviously had a lot on his mind; his face seemed to go through many emotions. Finally he said, ‘I know the old owner of your bank came here, a long time ago. I also think it was your people who killed the old man.’

‘You are correct, Gunter did come here. But we did not kill the old man,’ Beesely pointed out.

‘Why should I believe you?’

‘Because *we* killed Gunter,’ Otto cut in with.

Beesely glanced at Otto, surprised, then turned back to Novak.

Otto continued, ‘Killed him and stopped the bank’s money going to Nazi groups around Europe, after which we were attacked by those same Nazi groups. Herr Beesely’s daughter was killed in that attack.’

Novak was clearly surprised, straightening in his chair.

‘Yes, Minister,’ Otto added. ‘We fight Nazis, we don’t help them. My mother was Jewish.’

Novak nodded to himself. ‘And I think it was Nazis who killed the old man.’

‘We will find them and deal with them,’ Otto suggested. He raised his phone. ‘Put the boy on,’ he said, handing the phone to Novak.

‘Hello?’ Novak said. He followed with a minute’s conversation with his son, cold and detached, finally handing the phone back to Otto. ‘He is in a clinic in Switzerland. They ... are forcing him ... cold turkey. Even in prison he had the drugs.’

‘It is for the best,’ Otto suggested.

Novak nodded and stood. ‘There are many people who want to know what is in that cave, many who want to know about the people who operated it, and many powerful men who want it kept closed. I cannot help further.’ He walked off.

‘What was all that about?’ Beesely asked with a concerned frown. ‘You lost me in there, and you grabbed the kid without telling me.’

‘An idea I had, but not until now. I think Gunter did arrange the death of the old man, even after he was gone. I needed to convince the Minister that we are not the same. It has been seven months since Gunter’s death, so not long. As for the boy, you have enough to worry about, I must do some work to help you.’

‘Do you think the authorities here know anything about Gunter, his Nazi past?’

‘I am sure they do. At least this man does. I am also sure that on several occasions Gunter retrieved gold and other things from here. There is also the problem, I believe, that he was rumoured to have killed many Czech police officers.’

‘Really? Why?’

‘To get access to underground facilities here. It was said that hunting treasure with Gunter was the dangerous pastime. This joke is not so much the joke, I think.’

‘He killed them afterwards to keep them quiet,’ Beesely pointedly suggested. ‘And the Czech authorities suspected him, but did not say anything.’

‘Gunter will have bribed some of their officials. And there is another reason for being quiet.’ Beesely faced Otto, who added, ‘Many Czechs welcomed the Germans—’

‘In the Sudetenland?’

‘And elsewhere. After the war there was rumour of an underground Nazi movement here, helping the Western Allies against the Russians, funded with Nazi gold.’

‘Would Gunter have left anything of value in there?’ Beesely asked as he stood and stretched his legs.

‘No, I do not think so. These tanks, they would have not been so much value in 1964.’

‘But the rocket would have been of great interest!’

‘How could Gunter move these large items? If they were discovered the Russians would have taken them. So he kept quiet.’ Otto took a breath. ‘And if he left my mother here then maybe he did not want to think of it.’

Beesely took a reflective breath. ‘You know, from 1964 to 1968 there were a lot of attempts to kill me. I used to think I was popular.’

Otto stood. ‘It may have been Gunter. But he did not know about The Lodge, *or* how good you were.’

Beesely smiled at the compliment. ‘Many of those attempts were Europeans. Some German and French, all sorts. No Swiss, I believe.’

‘We will never know.’

‘Is it worth looking further through the cave system?’ Beesely pressed.

‘I think we must be thorough. If we will have a hotel and some business here, I hope no surprises near by.’

‘Get some geologists and seismologists, and some good computer guys who can make those –’

‘Three dimensional models.’

‘Yes. Make a model of the inside.’

A pain in the arse

1

A bump woke Johnno and Thomas. The helicopter's doors flung open and a blast of warm air tainted with aviation fuel greeted them. Johnno squinted against the bright light as he removed the headset, the burst of noise hurting his ears. With his eyes closed tightly he accepted a hand down from doctors and orderlies.

The helicopter had landed on a patch of brown and dry grass, a few short steps to a concrete path. They laid him face down onto a waiting trolley and wheeled him inside. An injection into his leg was the last he remembered.

* * *

A punch on the arm woke Johnno. He slowly opened his eyes into an air-conditioned and darkened room, thin blue curtains drawn tight.

'You are making the noise with the nose!' Thomas complained.

Johnno turned his head to the left. 'Hey, short arse,' he croaked out. Thomas now stood dressed in fresh clothes, spotlessly clean. Johnno studied him with a slight frown. 'You had a hair cut?'

'Yes, and two baths and they cleaned my nails on the fingers and toes, and I was swimming in the pool for fat old people with one leg.'

'You smell better. For that matter - so do I.' Johnno realised that his buttocks were throbbing a little, but not hurting. Reaching down with a hand he could feel a gap in

the bed, his butt cheeks hanging down into the gap and cradled by a spongy material. Handy, he considered.

‘They did the doctor work on your arse,’ Thomas informed him, giggling. ‘But before, they put the tube in your arse for the shit.’

‘Must have been nice for them,’ Johno said with raised eyebrows.

‘They all had the clear cream under the nose, for the smell,’ Thomas laughed. ‘Your clothes they burned in the hospital fire. After one hour they washed you, four nurses.’

‘Really? What were the nurses like?’

The boy shrugged. ‘They were older than my mother.’

‘Glad I was asleep then. You OK?’

‘Yes, I have a small bump on the head. They gave me needles and I have been drinking the medicine for the neck.’

‘Throat,’ Johno carefully pronounced. ‘Throat medicine. You sound better.’

‘*You* have a funny voice.’

‘Got any of that *neck* medicine?’

Thomas grabbed the electric bed controls and gently lifted the top half so that Johno came to rest at forty-five degrees.

‘Ah, that’s, better,’ Johno let out with a sigh. ‘Back is killing me.’ Thomas handed him a small bottle from his pocket, a quick swig downed. ‘Better.’

The door swung open, a doctor and the pilot, Steffan, entering.

‘How are you feeling,’ came from the doctor in a mildly accented voice.

‘Hey buddy,’ came from Steffan, now in casual clothes.

‘Normal,’ Johno answered to the doctor. ‘Which is never great.’ Only then did he realise that he was wired up, turning to the right and noticing the monitors. ‘Give it to me straight, Doc’, will I play the piano again?’

‘I seriously doubt that you played the piano anytime, Herr Johno,’ the doctor commented without looking up, checking the monitors.

Steffan laughed. ‘You want some food?’

The hunger hit Johno like a bolt. ‘Shit, yes.’ He faced the doctor. ‘Solids?’

‘Yes, your tract was not damaged. The shrapnel hit the bone and muscle.’ The doctor faced him, arms folded. ‘Could you pick up a peanut from a chair with your naked butt cheeks before?’

Johno eyes widened. ‘Nope.’

‘Well, you won’t miss it then.’ He checked the plasters and stitches on Johno’s face. ‘And I am afraid that you will not be as good looking as you were before.’

Steffan and Tomas burst out laughing.

‘Fine way to treat someone mortally wounded,’ Johno mock-complained.

‘I agree with young Thomas,’ the doctor commented. ‘You were made.’ He headed for the door. ‘Food will be sent in, ten minutes.’ Stopping and turning he added, ‘I would suggest mostly liquids, you *will* find using the toilet painful for a week.’

‘Hate to say it, Doc’, but I’ve been through that routine before.’

The man nodded, turned and left.

‘So, cushy number for a week,’ the pilot suggested.

‘Doubt it,’ Johno grumbled. ‘I’m too valuable.’

Steffan raised an eyebrow, hiding a smile.

‘What’s happening at the mine?’

‘They have removed all the bodies they could find, a lot of ceremony. I saw pictures of the Russian planes landing at Moscow airport, greeted by the Russian President himself.’

Johno squinted at Steffan. ‘Shit, that was quick!’

‘Today is tomorrow, Johno. You were out all night.’

‘What’s the time?’ Johno asked with a frown.

‘Twelve noon, day after you got here,’ Steffan explained.

‘Good kip then,’ Johno approved.

‘They removed the radioactive material, it went on an American C5 Galaxy from Prague airport, all over the news. They defused the bombs two days ago now. Americans burnt a hole in that metal door, took a day after they cleared out the radiation from that small room. They think that the main entrance will take another day or two to clear, then they can get heavy vehicles in there and start to remove stuff.’

‘I’d leave it in there, make a good museum of it.’

Steffan shrugged. ‘Politics.’

‘No need to swear in front of the boy,’ Johno complained. They laughed. ‘This a day off for you?’

‘Yes, I worked thirty-six hours straight. Back on tonight.’ He opened the top drawer of the bedside cabinet. ‘Phone and gun. No cigarettes, I’m afraid.’

‘Sneak some in.’

Steffan tipped his eyebrows. ‘Be my arse in the hole in the bed then. Maybe someone more senior can help you.’

Johno turned his head to Thomas. ‘Go steal some cigarettes and a lighter.’ Thomas ran out, Steffan shaking his head.

‘Kid’s good,’ Johno suggested. ‘He toughed it out in there. Most adults would have freaked it, let alone a

twelve-year-old kid. Dark, damp, smelly, skeletons and bombs everywhere.'

Steffan became serious, taking a breath. 'He stayed by your side until they put you here, hasn't gone far since – telling everyone how great you were in there. If my boy liked me, and respected me, as much as yours does - I'd be a happy father.'

Johno took a long, deep breath. 'It's a big responsibility,' he admitted, staring at the door. 'And a constant worry.'

Steffan smiled widely. 'Welcome to parenthood.'

'That's twice you've sworn at me. And I'm injured. Now fuck off, I need a bed pee. Oh, pick a tidy nurse and send her in.'

A giant of a woman appeared a minute later.

Bastard!

2

Beesely answered his phone whilst lying on the bed in his hotel room. 'Yes?'

'How's it going, old fucker?'

'Johno! You up and about? How's the pain in the arse?' He sat up, now on the edge of the bed.

'He's here as well.'

Beesely breathed out loudly. 'I didn't mean him, but I guess I walked right into that one.'

'What's happening? Anything *interesting* in there?'

'No, no treasure yet. We're surveying the complex, making a computer model. Bomb disposal are going around, making safe all the ordnance. Still not through the front door yet!'

‘I’ve ordered some concrete specialists, to arrange for all the walls to be dated and probed with small drills.’

‘Do tell?’

‘We’re missing something,’ Johnno suggested.

‘We’re missing a lot of pieces of this jigsaw puzzle!’

‘How did they get the fucking rocket in there? It’s huge, even the front door would have been too small, unless it arrived in bits like a Mechano set. There’re the remains of railway tracks in the rocket room, but they don’t go anywhere! And the railway connection is five kilometres away, and maybe a couple a hundred feet lower. Hell of a gradient for a frigging train!’

‘You have been thinking. Not just sitting on your arse.’

‘The one thing I won’t be doing much of ... is sitting on my arse. Out of here tomorrow.’

‘What’s the matter, don’t like hospitals?’

‘Fuck off,’ Johnno quietly muttered.

Beesely laughed. ‘You get better, and keep thinking. It opens up all new possibilities for the one they call El Johnno.’ He hung up, smiling.

Otto knocked and entered.

‘Just had Johnno on the line,’ Beesely enthused, standing.

‘How is the pain in the arse?’

Beesely scowled. ‘I suppose that joke will be going around for weeks. If not months.’

‘I would think so. So, how is he?’

‘Much better, be out tomorrow. He has ordered some concrete specialists.’

‘I was informed. They are here in one hour.’

‘He also made a good observation. That rocket was brought in by train, in parts - large parts. There is some

track inside, but just in the rocket room. The nearest rail link is five kilometres away, so how did it connect?’

Otto lifted his head, thinking. ‘Another tunnel, a large one, with track.’

‘Which we haven’t found yet,’ Beesely said. ‘I want all the walls probed, then drilled through, see what we can find.’

‘Soon we will have *ground survey* equipment. It reads under the concrete.’

‘Is it still busy up there?’ Beesely asked.

‘Not so much. The Czech Army and police have removed the outer exclusion zone, so now just three kilometres. There are ten Czech soldiers around each entrance and air vent, but they do not give us problems. We give them food, drink, cigarettes and tents. And we have allowed in photographers.’

‘Keeping the natives happy then. Good.’

3

A clattering generator sat creating a great deal of light, powering hot air blowers as well. Further generators and pumps were blowing air into the vents, all of them simultaneously, so that fresh air would circulate, allowing reasonable working conditions.

The metal doors had either been pinned back or cut down, the upper level now just one very long cavern, the original access tunnel being the main point of entry. Now a ground scanner was being dragged across the village floor, watched by many, including Mr. Grey and Simon. The scans were soon being read.

‘Yep, set of railway lines, right down the middle,’ the machine’s English operator informed them, his words echoing around the cavern.

‘Why bury railway lines in concrete, they are useful?’ Simon pondered.

Grey responded, ‘Concrete guys will be here soon, they can say what year it was done, so then we should know *who* and maybe *why*.’

Simon stepped up to a confidential distance. ‘Johno thinks there are many more passages here.’

Grey nodded. ‘That rocket didn’t fly down the launch hole like Thunderbird One!’

‘And there are no exits down stairs, only the small tunnel,’ Simon added.

‘It’s a fucked-up kinda place,’ Grey offered. ‘But I love the village.’ They took in the scene.

‘Which one is Thunderbird One?’ Simon whispered.

Grey leant closer. ‘Thunder Two is the fat one –’

‘Ah, the one like a plane, yes?’

Grey nodded. ‘Thunderbird One was like a rocket.’

‘Ah.’

The machine operator said, ‘So in here they trained German spies?’

‘Maybe Russian too,’ Simon added.

‘So why underground?’ the man asked.

Grey turned to Simon, a tired look. ‘Everyone has to ask that.’ He faced the man. ‘Listen, fella, we don’t know yet.’

Shouting from the far end caught their attention, someone shouting, ‘I can see light!’

‘Broken through,’ Simon suggested.

‘Took long enough,’ Grey complained.

They wandered down; through the office cavern - now clear of skeletons - through the tank room, through the cleaned up clock room - making light of John's handy work - and past the remains of what once passed as a Volkswagen camper van that had accidentally blown up. It had revealed no fingerprints or a license plate, the engine block now being checked. Finally they were six hundred yards along the cavern and at the narrowing entrance, a K2 man perched on the rubble close to the ceiling.

'It's light!' the man repeated.

The vibrations of equipment could be felt through their feet. Then a burst of light penetrated the cavern as a pile of rubble tumbled away. The guard jumped down, his chosen platform decidedly unstable, the breeze picking up quickly.

'Just like when they joined up the two sides of the channel tunnel,' Grey noted.

'My father worked on that,' Simon pointed out. 'Swiss tunnel engineer.'

Grey gave him an approving nod. 'OK, next problem. How to get the rocket ordnance up to this level.'

'First, I think we must find another passage,' Simon responded.

'Hard to picture how the two caverns relate,' Grey noted. 'I'm waiting to see the 3D image. That should tell us exactly where the tunnels should be, then we probe.'

A Czech engineer came through the hole, smiling. 'Bonjour, Dover and England!'

Simon and Grey rolled their eyes, their shoulders dropping.

A tap on the arm woke Johno. He opened his eyes and turned his head, finding himself staring at a pregnant woman.

‘You are Johno?’ she said in a French-accent. She stood very tall, in her late thirties and with large hips.

He stared, wide eyed. ‘Not something I admit to when facing a pregnant woman!’

She laughed. ‘Ricky described you well.’

‘Christ,’ Johno muttered. He reached the controls and lifted the bed to forty-five degrees. ‘I’m ... sorry about Herr Mole.’

She nodded her head, but did not appear sad. ‘He loved working for K2,’ she quietly admitted. ‘It gave him such a purpose and a pride in himself.’

Johno gave it some thought. ‘You have everything you need?’

She sighed, loudly. ‘If anyone asks me that again I will scream.’

Johno smiled widely. ‘Guess you must be getting a lot of sympathy around the town.’

‘I have everything I need - money, house. A little happiness would be good, but not so sure how to find that.’

‘Don’t worry, love, rest of us still looking for that one.’

‘I have learnt a great deal about you, from Ricky and Herr Mole.’

Johno offered her a mock look of anguish. ‘Oh?’

‘They were both very strong, intelligent, and good men. And they both had the most respect for you.’

‘Even Herr Mole? I did my best to annoy the little fucker!’

‘He liked the attention you gave him,’ she admitted with a short laugh. She pulled a chair over and sat.

‘I would have done that for you, love, but at the moment I’m a pain in the arse.’

Smiling, she said, ‘I want you to be the God parent.’

‘Wooah there, baby. Me? You mad?’

‘I was in the hospital today, to see the K2 doctor - I have all medical bills paid, the best care. I spoke to a guard about what happened to you, then I spoke to the boy, Thomas, for an hour. We had lunch.’

‘That can’t have been good for my reputation.’

‘After this talk, I want *you* as God parent.’

Johno squinted at her. ‘I’m confused, love. Listen, me and kids - not so good together. I nearly got the little short-arse killed!’

‘He told me everything.’

‘Weren’t you paying attention?’ Johno carefully mouthed.

‘You do not realise what qualities a woman looks for in a guardian for her children.’

‘Crazy bleeding women you mean. In case you hadn’t noticed I spend a lot of time in places like this, shot the fuck up. My predicted life span ain’t looking too long.’

‘But while you are here, and you are close by, I want you to think about it.’

Johno took a breath and studied her. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Hilda. Or Hildy.’

‘Listen Hilda, you’re carrying Ricky’s kid, so I would protect you - and the kid - with my life, you know that.’

‘And how does this compare to a father who may one day decide to just go and not come back?’

‘Stop making sense, you’re confusing me, woman.’

She laughed. ‘You think, and get well.’ Hilda squeezed his hand and left, leaving him ... confused.

‘It turns right into the wall?’ the man puzzled.

Grey and Simon were not as puzzled as the English ground-radar operator.

Simon lifted his radio. ‘Tell Herr Beesely that the hidden railway track goes through a wall, in the camper van room. East, it goes east.’ He lowered the radio. ‘Blow it or drill it?’

Grey inched his head closer. ‘I thought K2 used fifty cal’ rifles for this sort of work?’

Simon lowered his head and sighed.

‘We’re looking for Simon!’ came a loud voice.

They turned to find a group of six Swiss engineers with heavy bags, dragging more equipment balanced on two low trolleys.

‘I’m Simon. You are the concrete engineers?’

‘Yes. What do you want done?’ the first engineer asked, dropping his kit.

‘We want to identify the age and construction of every wall, when they were made, and if one was made on top of another.’

‘No problem.’

‘But first, you have drills?’ Simon asked.

‘Yes.’

‘This wall, there is something hidden behind it. We must be careful, maybe booby-traps from the last war.’

‘We were briefed. Who is bomb disposal?’ Grey waved. ‘OK,’ the engineer let out as he approached the wall. ‘We will make a small hole and look through.’

‘You have the small camera!’ Simon enthused.

‘It’s how we test concrete structures. Drill through, have a look from the inside, plug up the hole.’

‘Excellent,’ Grey quietly enthused. ‘I’ll get us some coffee.’

Ten minutes later Grey returned, a tray of coffees with lids on, some powdered milk and sugar sachets tucked in. He placed it onto a wooden crate nearby. ‘How’s it going?’

‘They are nearly through,’ Simon replied as he grabbed a coffee. ‘This wall is six inches of concrete.’

‘It’s a gusher!’ a man shouted, the others laughing.

As Grey and Simon turned back to the wall they could see a ten-foot spout of water bursting from the small hole drilled.

Grey smirked, stood with a hand in a pocket. ‘Should bottle it and sell it as spring water.’ They watched the water pooling on the recently dried-out floor.

‘Is it an underground river behind there?’ an engineer asked.

‘No,’ Grey informed him, a disappointed look. ‘Above us here is just twenty metres of rock. It’s rainwater, pooled in the cavern behind that wall. Good thing is, the water will have screwed up most of the booby-traps.’

An angry little Czech man appeared. ‘What are you doing?’ he growled in a heavily accented voice. ‘We cleared the water here!’

‘Sorry, *old chap*,’ Grey mocked. ‘Sprung a leak.’

Cursing under his breath the little man grabbed a sweeping brush and started moving the water towards the small drain in the centre of the cavern.

Grey faced the engineers. ‘Make some more holes, guys, or this’ll take ages.’

They re-started drilling, but lower down the wall. Soon six spouts were squirting water. As they watched, a chunk of concrete fell away. Grey waved the engineers back, away from the wall, stepping back himself. Simon noticed and backed up.

A cracking noise preceded another chunk of concrete falling away. The little man was furiously sweeping the water towards the drain, which had now backed up.

A loud crack, and the lower part of the wall gave way, a gush of water knocking the Czech man off his feet and soaking him in cold water. Laughs echoed around the cavern as men started to ease back, the water spreading. A wave washed up the opposite wall before spreading laterally down the cavern, people quickly grabbing kit bags and equipment and lifting them higher.

Grey waded through the ebbing flow and thrust his torch through the upper part of the cracked wall. Turning to Simon he shouted, 'Get some pipes and pumps, it's a big room, goes a long way back.' Simon lifted his radio.

Grey shone his torch through, suddenly focused on something. Smiling he raised his radio. 'Tell Beesely there's a train behind the wall. A miniature train, maybe six foot tall.' He beckoned the Swiss engineers. Pointing along the wall he said, 'Make another test hole over there, looks like another room.'

'Our drills have a limited life on batteries,' a man grumbled. 'When the water goes we need to rig a generator or connect to those outside.'

Grey straightened, took a few steps and grabbed a pickaxe then set about the wall, easily widening the hole as the water pressure dropped. With the help of Simon and a Swiss engineer he had a hole big enough for a man to walk through in ten minutes.

‘Stand back,’ Grey called. He waved away the engineer and waited, waving them on until they were twenty yards back.

A careful examination of the hole revealed no booby-traps. The front of the train, however, clearly offered a web of dangling wires. He eased through, immediately stepping awkwardly onto railway tracks that still lay submerged. Straightening, he examined the new enclosure. The room stood as tall as the main cavern, but not as wide. The walls were again smooth grey concrete, running away from the main cavern at a right angle and curving further to the right. And there was not one train, there were two, side-by-side and separated by a train width. Behind them ran a line of open-top carriages, suitable for lugging equipment, now slowly draining of water.

He turned right, checking the wall high and low, finding just plain walls. Along the walls he noted nothing of interest, stepping on a few submerged spades and tools. Twenty yards in he found another wall, stopping and staring. Turning left he could see the opposite wall. His brow furrowed as he clambered onto the last truck and shone his torch around the room’s extremities. The entire room was enclosed, nowhere for the trains to go. And no doors at all. ‘I hate this place.’

‘OK?’ Simon loudly called, his words echoing around the long room.

‘Stay back, drain the water first.’

He jumped down and retraced his steps, sloshing through six inches of water. At the hole he said, ‘There’re wires on the trains, maybe something on the floor. When the water is out we’ll sweep for grenades.’ With a hand from Simon he ducked back through.

‘Where does it go?’

‘Nowhere!’

‘Nowhere?’

Grey lifted his eyebrows. ‘The far wall is blocked up.’

‘It’s a crazy place,’ Simon muttered, peering through the hole.

‘I’ll radio the dimensions,’ Grey suggested. ‘They can add it to the model.’

A light at the end of the tunnel

1

A radio burst to life. 'Mr. Grey, Simon, come to the small tunnel please!' They glanced at each other, grabbed coffees and started walking through the complex in no particular hurry. At the schoolhouse they dumped their finished drinks and stepped down the spiral staircase, halting a man coming up. They emerged into the first small cavern, greeted by a K2 caver.

'We have cleared the rubble in the long tunnel,' the man informed them with a grin.

'And?' Grey probed, noting the man's expression.

The K2 man lifted his small echo sounder. 'This says that the tunnel goes maybe a kilometre.'

'Thousand yards!' Simon said.

'Let's go have a look-see,' Grey suggested, gesturing the man towards the tunnel entrance.

Once they had passed the V1 cavern and the zig-zag, they waded through three inches of water for a hundred yards before passing through the steel door, as far as Johnno and Thomas had penetrated. Beyond it waited a caver in dry-suit scuba gear.

'Ah, now that looks nice and warm,' Grey said as he patted the man on the shoulder. Facing the cleared rubble he asked, 'Any signs of wires?'

'No,' came back. 'But this roof was blown, a deliberate cave in. The rock here is good stuff to tunnel through. Not so hard, but it does not collapse so much either. The tunnel goes to a point at the top, which is good construction. They knew what they were doing.'

'OK then, let's take a peek.'

Grey took the lead, scrambling over the remaining rubble and into the continuation of the tunnel. He waited as the caver helped his diver buddy lift his silver aluminium tanks onto his back and scramble through. Ready now, they set off in a line.

‘No water here,’ Grey noted.

‘We are inclining down,’ a caver suggested.

‘Yeah, I reckon so,’ Grey confirmed.

Soon they could hear running water.

‘Spoke too soon,’ Grey sighed.

After a further twenty yards they noticed a widening of the tunnel and a stream running briskly from left to right. It ran at least six feet lower, visible through cracks in the rock floor that they were standing on.

‘There is no sign of winter flooding here,’ a caver noted.

‘Come again, buddy?’ Grey asked.

‘The walls here, the floor. I know caves and this tunnel does not flood in the winter.’

‘So access all year round by the diggers,’ Grey noted, making eye contact with Simon. Simon shrugged and they pressed on.

The downward incline increased marginally. After another hundred yards they could again hear running water.

‘Something ahead,’ Grey warned, slowing his pace. Ducking his head under a prominent rock he emerged onto a ledge and shone his torch around the cavern they emerged into. ‘Sweet ... Jesus!’

‘My God,’ Simon gasped as he straightened.

With the four of them stood on a ledge their combined torchlight lit the large cavern. This natural feature opened to the left of the tunnel, stretching back a hundred yards

and as tall as it was long. Stalagmites and stalactites grew to around three metres, down from the roof of the cavern and up from the floor like giant teeth. Metal ores and crystals in the rocks glistened, reflecting their lights and sparkling around the walls. A brisk stream ran down the middle of the cavern and disappeared into a hole close to the ledge they were on.

‘You caver guys getting a firm pecker?’ Grey asked with a smile.

‘Amazing!’ they let out.

‘You can come back and play later,’ Grey offered.

‘Wait,’ the scuba diver called. ‘Photo!’

Simon produced a digital camera and took several snaps, some of the cavers smiling broadly. Across a small jump from the ledge the tunnel continued.

As they plodded on the scuba diver said, ‘I think the caverns up above are natural, with some work after.’

‘Yep, makes sense,’ Grey agreed.

The tunnel continued. And continued.

‘I’ve been counting my paces,’ Grey informed them. ‘That’s eleven hundred.’ He stopped and turned. ‘Scuba guy, you want some help with that gear?’ The man did. They took a five-minute break, Grey and Simon both relieving the diver of a tank, Simon breaking a chocolate bar and sharing it out.

‘Ready?’ Grey called a few minutes later. They pressed on, another small cavern being photographed before the tunnel took a right turn.

Grey stopped and faced the gang. ‘How do you think they knew what direction to tunnel?’ he smugly asked.

The men glanced at each other. ‘Compass?’ Simon suggested.

‘Maybe. But I’ve noticed some course corrections. He lifted his hand and tapped the bottom of a metal pipe. ‘Fresh air, small tube.’

Simon examined it. ‘They drilled up? How?’

‘I think I know, but I’ll wait to see if you figure it.’ Smiling, Grey pushed on. ‘That’s two thousand yards,’ he called from up front.

At the next natural cavern they stopped for a break and a cigarette, all now both sweating and chilled at the same time.

‘I think this goes down towards the railway track,’ Simon suggested.

‘Maybe,’ Grey idly commented before noticing something on the wall. ‘Look,’ he pointed.

Simon inched towards the wall of the cavern. ‘It’s a Star of David. Jewish?’

‘Prisoners made this tunnel,’ Grey stated. ‘So that dates it from 1940 to 1945. Probably a lot of bodies in here somewhere. It must have been hell to dig this tunnel, and I think it probably took a year or so.’

‘Listen,’ a caver suggested.

They listened intently for several seconds.

‘It’s the road,’ Simon suggested. ‘A car.’

Grey nodded, throwing his cigarette into the gurgling water. ‘Ready?’

They stood, Grey and Simon lifting the air tanks. Another hundred yards further down the tunnel and they could again hear the rumble of traffic above them.

Grey stopped. ‘Smell it?’

‘It smells like shit,’ Simon suggested.

‘That’s because it is. Human shit,’ Grey said with a grin.

‘We are near the village?’

‘Nope,’ Grey enigmatically replied. He pressed on fifty yards before plonking down the metal tank. ‘Tanks won’t be needed, boys.’

Simon lowered his tank, noticing the metal door ahead.

‘Back up,’ Grey told them. ‘There’s a grenade-trap, but it’s on this side of the door.’ They backed up the tunnel, ten yards.

Grey cut the wire and removed the grenade, putting it in his pocket. With the rest of the door clear he eased it open with a loud squeak.

* * *

‘Sir! Herr Beesely, Herr Otto, come quickly!’

Otto and Beesely walked briskly back into the chateau, the commotion causing others to follow, including Novak, Blaum and an Ambassador. In the main hallway Grey stood smiling, the cavers emerging from a door under the stairs.

‘Mr. Grey ... you stink,’ Beesely dryly noted.

‘I can imagine,’ Grey said with a smile. ‘Just came from the complex the hard way!’

‘There is a tunnel?’ Novak gasped. ‘From here all the way up to the cave?’

Grey nodded. ‘A tunnel made with Jewish prisoners.’

‘Bodies?’ Beesely asked.

‘No, but a Star of David chiselled into the wall,’ Grey explained.

Beesely suggested, ‘Get cleaned up, let the people up top know you’re safe. Is that tunnel practical?’

‘Hell no,’ Grey firmly stated.

‘So this chateau,’ Blaum began, ‘was connected to the complex. The people who lived here, they knew.’

Beesely faced Novak. 'Perhaps you could check the records, wartime ownership - *and after.*'

Novak took a moment to respond. 'I think those German documents you found, you were meant to find them.'

'A distraction,' Beesely quietly commented, making eye contact with Otto.

'Mr. Grey,' a guard called from behind Beesely. 'They have found another room next to the trains.'

'Trains?' Novak repeated.

Grey explained, 'We just found a big room with two small trains inside. Trains are about six foot tall, but the odd bit is the room - it's sealed on all sides.'

'Why bother sealing them in?' Blaum enquired.

Beesely faced him. 'We have more good questions, Minister, than we have good answers.'

'I will be off now,' Blaum informed them. 'We are returning, myself and the Ambassador.'

Beesely faced Novak. 'There is room for one more, for a quick ... *visit* to Switzerland.'

Novak straightened, his features as cold as normal. 'Maybe in a few weeks, not now,' he softly stated. Turning quickly he stepped into the map room.

Beesely shook Blaum's hand. 'Thanks for all your efforts.' He repeated the gesture with the Ambassador.

'I have an election plan to make,' Blaum mentioned, a slight grin evident.

'Good luck with that, by the way,' Beesely formally offered.

They all walked around the chateau, towards the lawn and the waiting helicopter, Beesely and Otto waving off Blaum and the ambassador.

‘Sir,’ a guard called. ‘They have cleared the main entrance, vehicles can go in and large items can be removed.’

‘OK, thank you.’ Beesely led Otto to the stream. ‘Turns out that the liquid oxygen rotted the containers long ago and disappeared into a gas. The alcohol based fuel, Mr. Grey says, has fermented into a useless glue.’

‘So, no risk of an explosion,’ Otto noted.

‘There is a distinct lack of explosives anywhere near the rocket. The nose cone has just a small amount of explosive that apparently looks like it was hand-packed in there.’

Otto turned. ‘You think the rocket was to have a dirty bomb warhead?’

‘Hitler’s final weapon, aimed at London, Moscow or ... in his dreams, New York. They are analysing it now, but critical bits of it have been removed.’

‘Removed?’

Beesely nodded. ‘It is not as it was when assembled, certainly not ready to fly. Key components have been removed, as if to disable it.’

‘By the Russians?’

‘Hard to tell. The forensic pathologist in there says that some of the bodies were moved, some died where they were, but no sign of any Russians on the lower level.’

Otto’s brow furrowed as he thought. ‘Is it possible that the Russians did not find the lower level?’

Beesely made a face. ‘It was walled up. But if I was a curious Russian in a Nazi tunnel complex I’d be knocking down walls like crazy looking for treasure. Curious thing is - if the bodies did drop where they died - no weapons, no guards.’

‘Removed by Gunter, or others,’ Otto suggested as his phone went. ‘Yes?’ He listened. ‘Odd.’

Beesely sighed. ‘We shall have to think of other adjectives. I think we have used up *odd* and *strange*.’

‘This is ... *perplexing* then,’ Otto said with a smile. ‘The engineers say that the cottage and the schoolhouse were built five years before the remainder of the village, dated to 1933, or maybe earlier.’

‘1933?’ Beesely repeated, looking down and frowning. ‘That means that it was early Nazi, built outside Germany by Nazi sympathisers just as Hitler started to take real power. If the rest was 1938, that means they were training ready to parachute into England. Odd. Have a look to see if there are any castles nearby, any rich men living here around 1933 who were pro-Nazi.’

Otto faced him squarely. ‘What are you thinking?’

‘That the early Nazis had training camps outside Germany, training their people to take Germany by force before Hitler got into power. After that, why waste them.’

Otto lifted his phone and made the request.

A guard approached Beesely. ‘Sir, we are stopping many treasure hunters in the forest.’

‘Oh dear.’ He took a breath and straightened. ‘Ask them, the treasure seekers, if they would all attend a meeting tonight at 6pm at the Spa Hotel. Just the serious explorers.’

The guard bowed his head slightly and backed up as Otto lowered his phone.

‘Treasure hunters?’ Otto enquired. ‘Apparently there are some very serious explorers here.’

‘And some of them may shed some light on Gunter, or this place.’

Novak reluctantly joined Beesely and Otto for lunch at the Spa Hotel. No sooner had they ordered than both Otto and Beesely's phones went, the messages listened to.

'A problem,' Novak asked, observing Beesely staring at his phone.

'So it would appear,' Beesely answered, glancing across as Otto finished his call. 'The Russians not so happy with some of their skeletons. Not scientists from the 1950s, but Jewish scientists for the most part, captured by the Germans in 1941 from Poland and Byelorussia.'

Novak nodded, not shocked.

'You don't seem ... *surprised*, Minister.'

'That was Minister Wilhelm,' Otto cut in. 'A problem with the German bodies.'

'Problem?' Novak casually noted, trying his wine.

'The German bodies were prisoners, some Jews, Dutch, Belgian - some German scientists reported dead in 1944.'

Beesely frowned. 'Seems that news of their deaths was somewhat premature, by about ten years. Anything you would like to say, Minister, before we go the long way around and discover for ourselves?'

Novak put down his wine. 'Some parts of history are best left buried.'

'True,' Beesely agreed as his starter was placed down. 'But time has moved on, and most of what happened prior to 1955 is regarded as old history. Not too many shocks left.'

'They are some for my people,' Novak unhappily admitted. 'But I do not have all the facts, just rumours.'

Unpleasant rumours confirmed when that rocket was found.'

Beesely studied Novak for several seconds. 'Because getting a ballistic missile ready to fly takes a lot of time, expense ... and *manpower*. So why don't you tell us what those rumours say. After all, caves have a way of ... collapsing in on themselves.'

Novak eyes narrowed. 'You would bury it?'

'If necessary. But I'm afraid it was probably too late when those bodies left.'

Novak nodded. 'Yes, your eagerness to do the right thing was short sighted. Collapsing the cave may have been better. For everyone, your bank especially.'

'We know Gunter visited in 1964,' Otto admitted.

'Not just in 1964,' Novak pointed out, a storm of worry on his face.

'No?' Beesely asked.

Novak glanced around the restaurant. 'I believe Gunter and his ... *associates* were there from 1944 to 1965, continuously.'

Otto seemed horrified at Novak's suggestion, but it also rang some bells. He made eye contact with Beesely. 'It may have been a good idea to collapse the cave. After Johnno was out.'

'We could not have known,' Beesely said with a sigh. He faced Novak. 'So this ... hidden *redoubt* was funded by what ... Nazi treasure? For ten years? And those skeletons, they were captive scientists, finishing the rocket ready for the dirty bomb, fire it at Moscow?'

Novak nodded. 'I think so.'

'Jesus,' Beesely breathed out. 'Holding prisoners in a cave for all that time. And your shame is, your people's shame, is that they could not have kept it supplied without

Czech Nazi assistance, right under the noses of the Russians. Hell of a logistical achievement, supplied through the chateau.'

'The Israelis and the Jewish Congress will not be happy,' Novak quietly suggested. 'They will make trouble.'

Otto turned his head to Beesely.

Beesely raised his phone. 'Elle Rosen.' He waited.

'Beesely? How goes the treasure hunt?'

'Are you sitting down?'

'What has happened now?' came a tired voice.

'That cave complex, Nazis used Jewish labour to make it.'

'No surprise there, Beesely.'

'Right up until 1955.'

Elle paused. 'What? Are you crazy?'

'It appears that the complex was hidden and manned with captured scientists at the end of the war, supplied by a Czech Nazi groups as they worked on the rocket, hoping to send a dirty bomb to Moscow. Right up until 1955, when they were all suddenly killed. The workers that is, not the staff or guards.'

'There were Jewish prisoners, alive until 1955?' Elle pressed.

'Yes, it would seem so, and I need containment on it. It's history, and we are dealing with it. Send me a senior representative of The Congress, please. Oh, some of the *German* bodies, turns out they are Jewish. You'll need to apply for them.'

'My God, Beesely, how do you manage to find these things?'

'It's a gift. Let me know, yes?'

'Will do, Beesely.' He hung up.

Novak had been listening intently. 'Who was that?'

'Mossad.'

'Mossad? And you know the Jewish Congress?'

'Yes, we are good friends. Does that help things, Minister?'

'If it can be dealt with ... discreetly. I don't want the world blaming us for what happened here.'

'These old men are dead,' Beesely pointed out. 'Any of the original Nazis would be long gone.'

Novak took a long breath.

'No?' Beesely puzzled.

'There is still a small underground Nazi movement,' Novak admitted. 'We think they have had Nazi gold all this time to fund themselves.'

'They were resistance to the Russians?' Otto enquired, trying his starter.

'In a small way, yes. Up until 1962 maybe.'

'What about the Russians inside, watches from 1950?' Otto pondered.

'Captured nosing around probably,' Beesely suggested.

'And kept alive?' Novak puzzled.

'They needed workers, some of the wartime prisoners must have got sick and died.' Beesely shrugged. 'Without knowing who they were, exactly, it is hard to say.'

'There were a lot of Russians,' Otto pointed out.

'Maybe captured in many places here, taken to the cave,' Novak offered. 'Captured for their technical knowledge, maybe doctors.'

'Any ideas as to why so many walls were built?' Beesely asked Novak. 'They went to a lot of time, expense and trouble, even smoothing over the train tracks.'

Novak shook his head. 'It makes no sense to me.'

At 6pm Beesely opened the meeting, fifty Czech treasure hunters and some Germans. ‘Thank you all for attending here today, I hope you can all understand my softly spoken English. If not, I can repeat in French or German, that’s all I am afraid.’

No one raised any objections.

‘My name is Sir Morris Beesely, and I am the owner of the International Bank of Zurich.’ He could see some puzzled expressions. ‘I recently bought the chateau at the base of the mountain, which started this whole thing off. You see, some of my staff found a cave and wandered inside, getting themselves stuck ... and the rest is history. But like you, I am interested in history - and treasure, if there is any.

‘So far they have found tanks, an ME163 –’ gasps. ‘- a mini-sub –’ more gasps and turned heads. ‘- and a ballistic missile as has been reported in the press. They have also found a Sherman tank, a half-track, a lot of artillery shells, plus a lot of booby-traps. But I understand, from chatting to some of you earlier, that such booby-traps are normal here in the Czech Republic.’

He could see a few nods. ‘I am a wealthy man, but I also like my metal detector hobbies.’

A few laughs rippled around. ‘So I will say this. If anyone has any information about hidden Nazi treasure - *credible* information - then I will be interested in talking to you. If anyone has any information about the cave complex discovered, history or rumours, then please let me know. I may, in the future, fund digs.

‘Now, we have some enlarged photographs from inside the complex, and some small items on display here for you

to look at. It's no good asking me about the inside, I probably know less than you do.'

The treasure hunters stood and wandered to the tables, staff making sure that they all had plenty to drink.

One middle-aged man, a stocky bald Czech, came straight over to Beesely. 'I have information for sale about the cave complex.'

Beesely glanced at Otto then led the man to the side, flanked discreetly by guards. 'Go on.'

'I want five hundred euros for the first piece of information, that you don't seem to have.'

Otto produced a wad, counting out the money.

The man pocketed it quickly. 'That complex was said to have been built here because two thousand years ago the Romans had a mine there, tin or copper. In the middle ages they thought it haunted. Some thought the Romans hid treasure there, that's why Hitler sent men there to dig.'

Beesely stood hunched over, nodding to himself. 'Yes, I can believe it. What else?'

The man made a face and shrugged. 'I have the maps that say where they found some Roman coins nearby.'

'Bring them. Anything else?'

'There was a link of the local baron in 1931, to the Nazis.'

'*That* ... I would be interested in. See what you can find and get back to us.' The man trotted off for some food.

'You believe him?' Otto asked, watching the man go.

'Roman mines? Yes, I think so. Hitler was mad for that type of stuff, he had secret digs all over the place. They didn't make Indiana Jones fight the Nazis for nothing!'

The meeting produced a lot of rumours, but not much else. Novak put in a quick appearance, wandering around

and checking faces, scaring off some attendees when they recognised him, the timid explorers bolting for the door.

4

Not surprisingly, Johno quit hospital early, driven to Zug with Thomas and arriving as it was getting dark. In the great hall he got a slow clap from the SAS ready squad.

‘How’s the pain in the arse?’ Kev loudly called.

‘He’s here,’ Johno replied, getting a punch on the arm from Thomas.

The guards greeted him with large grins and small nods. At the top of the command centre stairs he halted, the night-shift staff looking up.

‘Right, as you’re *all* aware, I have been injured in the arse,’ he loudly announced. They all smiled, politely, dedicated Swiss professionals hiding their grins well. ‘So there’s no need to mention it again. I need a helicopter at 9am, a wake up call at 8am. Thank you.’ He gave an exaggerated regal bow.

In the restaurant he found a few managers eating, the men smiling and waving when they noticed him. He and Thomas ordered food, a lot of food.

‘So what did you say to the pregnant lady?’ Johno playfully demanded, now able to *sit on his arse* without too much pain.

‘Pregnant?’

‘A baby in the stomach!’

‘Ah, we had food. She is a nice lady.’

‘And you told her all about me?’

‘I told her about the cave and the village and making British Army tea, and stitches in your fat smelly arse and Steak.’

‘Didn’t put her off her food then?’

Thomas shook his head.

‘Where is Steak anyway?’ Drinks were delivered with doughnuts.

‘In the house for sick animals,’ Thomas explained.

Johno stopped smiling. ‘He’s OK?’

Thomas nodded. ‘He has many small animals in his skin and ... things. They will make him better after two days with needles,’ he idly reported before wolfing down doughnuts with all the finesse of a bear cub.

The managers were leaving and said hello as they passed.

‘Hey?’ Johno called. ‘Can you ask someone to send up the latest diagrams of the complex?’

The second manager opened the file he had been carrying and stepped over with a big smile, placing down five computer-printed sheets.

‘Ah, good man,’ Johno commended, starting to study the detail.

‘Do you know it connects to the chateau?’

Thomas snapped his head around.

Johno looked up. ‘It connects? Where?’

‘The small tunnel you went into, with the rock fall. They moved the rocks and Mr. Grey and Simon went down, three thousand yards to the chateau.’

‘Three thousand yards? Fuck, glad *we* didn’t head down it.’ He finished the sentence addressing Thomas.

‘How much is that?’ Thomas asked.

‘Three kilometres walk down the wet tunnel!’

‘Errr,’ Thomas grimaced. ‘It was very cold and wet.’

‘You were very brave,’ the manager commended, Thomas smiling with pride as they walked off.

‘They’re all proud of you,’ Johnno suggested. ‘You were brave, not too much complaining.’

Thomas sipped his mug of K2 tea. ‘This is better than the tea in the cave.’

‘Which was more help?’ Johnno said, tipping his eyebrows.

‘British Army water cuppa,’ Thomas smiled.

‘Right. Soon I’ll take you on a proper survival course.’

‘Yes,’ the boy keenly agreed. ‘To eat rats.’

Johnno studied the aerial view diagram. The main entrance sat detailed on the far right of the paper, where the track curled around the contours of the mountain. The entrance walls were drawn at a slight angle down, meeting the main cavern, which was squared up to the paper edges. The camper van room came first, Johnno pointing it out to Thomas, the train room indicated, then the clock room, the tank room ongoing to the left, the office and then the village, finally a ninety-degrees turn down towards the machine room and the first entrance.

From the school room the narrow tunnel snaked under the village at an angle, opened into a cavern, turned slightly right and parallel to the village before turning right into the rocket cavern. The new extension to the small tunnel was shown on a separate page, a much smaller scale.

Those caverns ran almost parallel to the village, about twenty metres separating them. The end of the lower cavern, that they had found booby-trapped, was walled up on the other side. Johnno asked the kitchen staff for a pen, drawing a line from the end of the rocket cavern, around in a half circle to the room with the suitcases.

‘I think there’s something here,’ he said as he illustrated the idea for Thomas. ‘It’s the only way to get

the lorries up and down.’ Thomas studied the map with great interest as Johnno lifted his phone. ‘It’s Johnno, get me Simon.’ He waited.

‘Home for fallen women, Matron speaking?’ came from the phone.

Johnno frowned and laughed at the same time. ‘Who’s that?’

‘Grey, pecker head.’

‘Hey buddy, when did you get here?’

‘Just about three days ago. Got a call after some daft fucker got stuck in a cave. Parachuted in with top bomb disposal boys.’

‘Hope I didn’t drag you away from something ... *important.*’

‘I was having my hair done.’

They laughed.

‘You in charge of bomb disposal?’

‘Joint, with Simon. Simon is in charge of the site, well, from a K2 point of view. Czechs are all over it. How’s the pain in the arse?’

‘He’s here.’ Thomas punched him again. ‘Listen, you know the suitcase room?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Do me a favour, break a hole in that wall or floor, pronto, will you.’

‘You know something?’

‘Been looking at the pictures. Truck must have driven out that way.’

‘We’ll take a look. You just —’

‘Sit on my arse! Yes, I know. And what you doing answering Simon’s phone?’

‘Right now he’s *sitting on his arse*, or rather squatting, frightening the local bears.’

‘Ask him if the shit sticks to his fur. See ya.’ He hung up.

‘Who is it?’

‘Mr. Grey, American. You met him.’

Thomas nodded, distracted by the diagrams.

5

Grey stood in front of the wall in question with Simon and a dozen engineers. The jagged hole into the suitcases room had been widened and now afforded easy access. They stood tapping the inner wall.

‘It sounds the same all along,’ Simon noted. He started hammering on the floor. ‘Solid.’

‘Truck got in here somehow,’ Grey pointed out. He stood to one side. ‘OK, boys, give it hell.’

The engineers stepped forwards, three drills starting up at the same time and attacking the old concrete, Grey and Simon stepping out for a cigarette break.

As they stood in the dark a guard came running. ‘Simon, we have found something!’

‘What?’ Simon asked, clearly tired.

‘At the helicopter landing sight. The corner of something concrete under the grass.’

Grey and Simon turned towards the unseen site, almost parallel to the track and fifty yards away, not visible through the trees.

Grey shook his head. ‘That’s well away from the complex, which is behind us. Only tunnel that goes in that direction is the small one, and that’s at least a hundred feet below us.’

Simon turned to the guard. 'Divert the helicopters, get a team to clear the site, carefully, you don't want to fall down a missile silo.'

They stubbed out their cigarettes and wandered back inside, commenting on the old car and the numerous 'smiley faces' drawn into the dust.

'Well?' Grey asked they entered the suitcase room.

'We're in eight inches already,' a man complained.

'How thick was the train wall?' Simon asked.

'Eight inches, but the thickness varied. It was carefully made on the outside, no so much on the inside.'

'Keep going,' Grey nudged, placing on a pair of ear-defenders.

Ten minutes later the main driller stopped. 'I'm through!'

'How thick?' Simon shouted.

'Twelve inches!'

'Shit,' Grey let out. 'They didn't want this room found. Camera!'

The engineer with the pen-camera eased it through, studying a two-inch black and white screen. 'Big room, same size as this. It goes down.'

'Well done Johnno,' Grey offered. 'Any wires?'

'No,' the cameraman suggested. 'Smooth wall.'

Grey stepped back. 'OK boys, shift work, two on, one support. Call us when it's a big hole, and *don't* go in.'

The 'big hole' took more than four hours, Simon waking Grey at 2am, the American having the annoying habit of going from fast asleep to wide awake in a second.

With Simon complaining about the lack of sleep, and carrying two coffees, they walked through the forest from the permanent camp near the missile silo, back down to the track then along to the first entrance. Cigarettes

stubbed out at the entrance, coffee gulped, they entered the passageway - now permanently lit with a pearl-string of small lights.

‘Good morning campers!’ Grey let out when he noticed some sleepy K2 guards. He stepped through, finding a hole two foot wide and five foot tall, jagged at the edges.

Grey stepped straight into the dark hole, turning on a large torch, Simon pulling up next to him. ‘It’s an early multi-storey car-park,’ Grey suggested with a grin.

Stretching down in front of them lay just that; a concrete ramp declining thirty yards, a curved turn, another ramp going lower, back towards them and no wall between the two ramps.

‘You have coins for the meter?’ Grey asked as they walked down, flashing their torches. ‘After all this time, the Panzer will probably be clamped!’

They turned the corner, stopped dead, then ran back up laughing and through the hole.

‘What is it?’ the Swiss engineers asked.

Grey and Simon were in hysterics. ‘Have a look,’ Grey suggested as he stepped out of the room. He grabbed a sleepy guard. ‘Go radio for a vet with a tranquilliser gun. Tell Johnno we found Steak’s mum!’

A shriek came from the new hole, an engineer running through a moment later. ‘There’s a fucking bear in there!’

‘It’s not a very big bear!’ Grey chided. ‘It’s hardly bigger than a small car. But no one shoot it, the kid will be all over us.’

‘I’ve got some meat,’ a man volunteered. ‘Two tins. We can tempt it out.’ He produced them from his pack. They used the tin’s small key to unwind the lid and scooped out the contents with a knife.

‘OK, stand back,’ Mr. Grey ordered. ‘Let’s see if the bear’s hungry.’ With cupped hands full of meat, Grey stepped back in with Simon, his torch slung over his shoulder on a strap.

The bear stalked slowly up the ramp, limping, and did not look in the best of health. Simon stopped, Grey edging closer as the bear started to growl. It smelt the food and raised its snout, stopping dead.

Grey knelt down, dropping the meat, then stood off to one side and waited. Simon slowly inched out his pistol.

The bear inched closer, driven by hunger, eventually licking the meat and stepping back. It grabbed a chunk and withdrew, lowering its head to the floor as it chewed. Those bits it dropped it licked up quickly, coming back for more. A minute later the meat had gone. Grey took a chocolate bar from his pocket and opened it, tossing it to the bear’s feet, the hole in the wall behind him now full of silent observers. The bear took the chocolate and lowered its head as it ate.

Grey turned his head to the hole, waving a signal. The men got out of the way, Simon quietly moving further to one side. Grey stepped to the wall as a chocolate bar came through the hole, landing just inside. The bear could smell fresh air, freedom more important than further sticky food. It bolted for the hole, shouts and screams echoing a second later.

Grey and Simon laughed loudly as they walked down the ramp for the second time. The lower level of the ramp turned back on itself and then kept going.

‘You know what I think,’ Grey began, pointing over his shoulder. ‘I reckon they blocked up the rocket entrance.’

Simon nodded as they went down another four levels. 'How far down do you think?'

'Lower than the floor of the missile silo,' Grey pointed out.

They descended further, checking the walls as they went. Their radios crackled, the signal too distorted and now being ignored.

'Must have been fun getting a truck up and down here,' Grey commented as they turned another corner, heading ever lower. Finally they hit a dead end with a large crack in the wall on the left, just enough room for the bear.

'I hate this place,' Grey sighed. Kneeling, he shone a torch at the opening. 'Big enough for a bear, so definitely big enough for a man.'

'What's inside?'

Grey stuck his torch in. 'Level three.'

'Three?'

'Third level down, same size and style as the others. Line of trucks, maybe ten. Lot of boxes.' He stood. 'Back up, get some kit, widen this entrance, then we start again.' They began the long haul back up.

6

Otto took the call in Beesely's bedroom as they sat drinking wine. When finished, he informed Beesely, 'A third level, below the others.'

'Crikey. Big complex.'

'This one has ten trucks, some boxes. Johnno suggested that Simon dig behind the wall in the suitcase room, they found it there.'

‘How did Johnno know where to look?’ Otto shrugged.
‘Must have got a sense of the place from inside,’ Beesely suggested as he phone rang. ‘Yes?’

‘Heard the news?’ Johnno buoyantly asked.

‘Johnno, yes, you psychic now?’

‘Psychotic maybe. Listen 9am, meet me there, flying back.’

‘Are you ... well enough?’ Beesely delicately broached.

‘Fine, stop whining.’ He hung up.

‘Johnno will be here 9am. Guess he wants to have a look at that new room. Those trucks sound promising.’

‘I will wake you 7am,’ Otto offered as he eased up.

‘Goodnight.’

* * *

It took only thirty minutes drilling to make a suitably sized hole in the level-three wall since it was already crumbling.

The generator was knocked off. ‘American!’

Grey and Simon eased up slowly and walked down to the engineer, taking off their ear defenders.

‘It’s Mister Grey, not *American*,’ Grey softly corrected the engineer.

‘So many damn people here from so many places I don’t know the fuck who anyone is,’ the man grumbled.

‘I know the feeling,’ Grey replied as he ducked through the hole. Simon followed with two more American bomb disposal technicians. Grey faced them. ‘Hey, you Americans, wires! You know the drill.’

The two ‘Americans’ started at the entrance, radiating outwards.

Grey walked forwards with Simon, both going straight for the back of the nearest truck. With a leg up from

Simon Grey peered inside. Boxes, but no wires. He clambered in, offering a hand for Simon. Sitting on boxes with stencilled German writing they forced open other boxes with screwdrivers, cracking the damp wood easily. Inside they found silver ammunition tins. Grey flipped one open and pulled back the paper-thin metal seal.

‘Ammunition,’ Simon muttered. ‘Lot’s of it.’

They checked several boxes, finding them all the same. Opening the tailgate they eased down and to the next truck; more boxes opened, more ammunition found.

‘Quite the small armoury here,’ Grey noted as they headed for the third truck, finding it similarly stocked, and for the next tiring eight trucks to the end of the cavern, where the same style of metal doors greeted them.

‘Someone was planning a war,’ Simon noted.

‘Stupid fuck Hitler still thought he had a chance. Hide some soldiers here, pop-up later. Yeah, right. Let’s go left around the room.’

‘Grenade!’ echoed down the cavern. They stood where they were as the bang echoed down the cavern. It was too far off for it to be of any danger, they were more than a hundred yards distant.

‘Sorry!’ echoed down.

‘Bloody Americans!’ Grey cursed. ‘I’ll bring some Canadians next time.’

Simon tapped him on the arm and pointed at the first large crate. Then Simon stopped dead. ‘Hey, how did that bear get in here?’

They shone their torches at the metal gates; closed and padlocked.

‘Must be a hole, big enough for a bear,’ Grey suggested.

‘We’ll look as we go.’ Simon broke open the wooden crate with his screwdriver, Grey pulling away the rotten wood.

‘Yeah, baby!’ Grey let out, lifting out an MP40 machine pistol. ‘This little baby was the forerunner of every assault rifle in the world.’

‘A lot of ammunition, so why not a lot of rifles. Fuck it, let’s open the doors.’

‘Easy tiger.’

They stepped slowly to the doors, checking for booby traps. Nothing could be seen through the small gaps in rusty metal gates, so Grey squeezed a blob of plastic explosive inside the large keyhole of the padlock, kneading it in. Finally he attached a small fuse, breaking the end as if snapping a match.

He faced Simon, a wicked grin. ‘Run,’ he whispered.

Simon’s eyes widened. He turned and ran, followed by Grey.

‘Fire in the hole!’ Grey shouted.

Five seconds later the bang echoed down the cavern, Grey walking briskly back to the padlock, now hanging open, as dust and stones fell down around them. Throwing off the padlock he opened the door slowly, checking for wires. It seemed clear, so they stepped through. Twelve lorries in a line greeted them.

Grey turned to Simon. ‘I spy, with my little eye, something beginning with ... ‘A’.’

Simon held a forefinger to his chin. ‘Ammo?’ he ventured.

Grey lifted his eyebrows. ‘You’re ... good.’

‘First, the bolts,’ Simon suggested.

They turned, heaved on the rusty bolt for five minutes and released the main door. With an ear-rupturing squeak they opened the large doors fully.

Simon peered down the line of trucks, both ways, before sighing in the cold air. 'I am volunteering the Czech Army to move this lot. Their problem.'

They clambered into the first truck, finding just ammunition. The second truck they just peeked into, the same size boxes, so it got ignored. Third truck the same. Fourth truck, larger boxes.

They faced each other. 'Rifles,' they said in unison, but climbed in anyway. Prising off the lid of the first box they found a cloth, under which sat three paintings.

'Jackpot!' Grey announced. 'Ladies and gentlemen we have a winner.'

'Cannot be valuable, like the paintings upstairs - left to rot.'

'I'm no art expert, but they look old, and nice oil paintings,' Grey argued.

'I know Gunter, and *he* knew art treasure. If they were valuable he would have removed them.'

'A puzzle then.'

They started on the next box. More paintings, the third box offering up silver tea sets.

'*They* ... have to be valuable,' Grey insisted, examining the bottom of one, holding it to the light of his torch. 'Genuine silver markings. And Russian.'

'I'll call Otto later.'

They tackled additional boxes with renewed vigour. China, more silver, more paintings, coloured glass panelling, assorted jewellery, and a safe.

'A safe?' Simon puzzled.

'Let's have a look.'

‘You can open it?’

Grey smiled enigmatically. ‘I can open any safe in the world. Part of my training.’

‘I like this training programme,’ Simon enthused as they slid the heavy box towards the back of the truck, moving other boxes up and over it, ten minutes arduous labour.

They were starting to glisten, the cold air keenly felt on their faces. With the box at the tailgate they pushed it over, crashing it onto the concrete floor and splintering the wooden box that housed it. Jumping down they kicked away the rotten wood, righting the old safe.

Grey examined it. ‘Two simple tumbler key locks, 1930s or 1940s. Blowing it will be easy.’

‘You’ll destroy what’s inside,’ Simon whispered.

‘No, it’s all about pressure, no flame or force. Pressure goes in and bounces back.’ Grey jammed plastic explosive into the two keyholes and kneaded it in, just as with the padlock, the fuse attached and snapped as before.

Simon walked a few steps, Grey just three. ‘Fire in the hole,’ he quietly stated.

The blast was not great, echoing around the cavern and loosening more dust and stones from above, the safe door swinging open. Kneeling down they examined the contents with their torches, finding just paper files.

Simon opened some and read. ‘Plans for the reconstruction of Germany.’

‘Hah! Us ... *generous* Yanks did that with the Marshal plan!’

Once is unfortunate, twice is just rude

1

Not being able to sleep, Johno wandered out from his 'snug' and into The Dungeon at 3.30am, finding Thomas playing computer games. 'Can't sleep?'

'Went to sleep at 8pm.'

'Hungry?'

'Yes.' The boy jumped up.

Johno squeezed out the last of the ketchup onto his chips then doused them in vinegar. Looking up he noticed the kitchen staff filing out.

The first stepped up to him. 'We go now, sir, thirty minute break. If you want anything –'

'Go, go,' Johno coughed out. 'I can help myself.'

The kitchen staff trundled out as the SAS 'old dogs' wandered in, black fatigues and MP5s slung over shoulders, smirking towards Johno as they slowly progressed.

'Right, Boss?'

From under his eyebrows Johno watched them, helping themselves to tea, doughnuts and cake before sitting in the corner.

Ten minutes later Thomas suggested ice cream, both of them getting up and wandering into the kitchen storeroom where tall, stand-up silver fridges lined the walls. Thomas opened the first fridge, grabbed a tub and wandered out. Johno ran a finger over the selection available, grabbing three small tubs, one of each of his favourites. Closing the fridge door he dropped one.

Easing down cautiously, with his bad knee in mind, he reached for the tub, now sat under the legs of the fridges. Reaching in between two fridges he noticed something on the painted wall behind the fridges, something that chilled him more than the vanilla and raspberry he now held.

He straightened. 'Ready squad! On me!'

They came running, weapons prone.

'Ditch the weapons, grab these fridges and ease them back. Quickly.'

'What for?' Kev asked as he stepped forwards.

'There's a hidden passage,' Johno carefully mouthed to him.

'Shit ...' Kev let out.

The squad grabbed the fridges and eased them out, pulling out the power plugs without noticing. The room's central table got dragged noisily away, making more room. Finally, Johno grabbed a saucepan off the wall and started tapping the wall as Thomas appeared and pushed to the front, spooning out large lumps of ice cream.

'What is it?' he idly enquired.

Johno smiled knowingly and pointed at the mark on the wall.

Thomas knelt down and examined it. 'It is similar to the mark in the butcher's shop.'

'Butcher's shop?' Kev repeated.

Johno made eye contact, a large grin. 'Butcher's shop in a fake village in a sixty year old Nazi cave complex.'

'How's that possible?' Kev questioned.

'Old man Gunter, Beesely's predecessor, was involved with the complex in the Czech Republic.'

'Jesus,' Kev let out.

'And the man who did some of the concrete walls in the cave made this mark. Probably a long time ago.'

‘That wall backs onto the cliff,’ Kev pointed out.

Johno handed him a raspberry ice cream pot off the table. ‘Well done, you win a prize.’ He continued tapping the wall. ‘Can’t tell, but it doesn’t sound thick.’

‘Builder’s cupboard!’ Kev shot in.

Johno turned fully to Kev. ‘Builder’s cupboard?’

‘Next door there’s a store room,’ Kev explained with a smirk. ‘They keep their tools here, saves bringing them back and forth.’

Johno rolled his eyes. ‘Get them. C’mon.’

A minute later Johno had a large hammer in his hand. Quite a crowd had now gathered; the kitchen staff had returned early to see what the problem was, along with a few guards, as Johno started to swing at the wall, chipping off chunks of concrete - much to the horror of the kitchen staff.

After just thirty seconds of earnest whacking the concrete cracked, a line some three-foot tall snaking up the wall. He swung harder, now aiming for the sides of the crack and widening it until a section fell away into an unseen opening.

‘Shit,’ Kev let out slowly. ‘Something behind there.’

Johno waved Thomas back a step and swung hard, knocking out chunks until he had made a sizeable hole. Accepting a small torch off Kev, part of his standard web equipment, Johno illuminated a tunnel that had not been penetrated for perhaps forty years. ‘There’s a tunnel.’

Whispers shout around the kitchen.

Johno faced a guard, ordering, ‘I want powerful torches,’ the man running out immediately.

Lifting the heavy hammer he started on the wall again, making the hole larger, enough for him to ease through without difficulty. The guard returned, panting, passing

forwards a large torch. Poking his upper body through the hole Johnno checked for booby-traps, finding just a chiselled rock wall and a familiar damp smell.

He stood back, the assembled crowd getting an unpleasant whiff and backing up. 'I want crowbars and large hammers, cave team, engineers and bomb disposal. Move it people!'

As the guards grabbed phones Johnno moved Thomas back from the hole and continued widening it, Kev tucking into his raspberry ice cream. Hitting the wall close to the opening made cracking the old concrete much easier, soon a hole big enough to walk in for someone of Thomas's size.

Glistening with sweat, Johnno let Thomas have a go with the hammer, pinching the remaining ice cream off Kev. Guards returned with crowbars and other tools, torches and pickaxes. After ten minutes they had made a man sized hole. Johnno again checked carefully for booby-traps before stepping cautiously inside.

The tunnel stood six foot high and just over six foot wide, the rock surface appearing less well chiselled than in the complex. To Johnno, it looked older somehow. He shone his torch down the tunnel, not seeing any significant features; it sloped down at a slight angle and curved to the left. He took three steps then became aware of Thomas on his right.

'Fuck! Thomas - get back!' he shouted, thumbing towards the opening.

It was too late, the rumble and screech were familiar, the bright light from the kitchen storeroom sliced away in an instant. Johnno dived towards the metal plate, a thin strip of light visible at the base. 'Kev!'

A crowbar came through, an inch from his face. Then another. As the metal sheet fallen it had crushed the dislodged concrete blocks, leaving a two-inch gap.

Johno sighed. 'Forget the crowbars, boys, this door weighs a tonne. But jam them in, stop it closing all the way.' He stood and faced Thomas.

'I didn't do it!' the boy protested.

Johno stared at him for a moment, then breathed out heavily. 'Got any tea bags?'

Thomas gave a big shoulder shrug, continuing to spoon out ice cream.

'C'mon.' They turned, Johno shining the torch down the tunnel.

'We will be cold,' Thomas pointed out as they started forwards.

'I know, we're both in t-shirts. But that gap under the door is big enough for teabags at least.'

2

Otto took the call as he and Beesely were conducting middle-of-the-night staff reviews, going through files that a K2 manager had brought to them an hour earlier. Neither of them could sleep. He lowered the phone, Beesely concerned by the perplexed look.

'Problem?' Beesely enquired.

'Only Johno could do this.'

'Do what? What's he done *now*?'

Otto rubbed his eyes and took an audible breath. 'He noticed a marking on a wall in the castle. That marking was the same as on a concrete wall here.'

Beesely's eye's widened. 'That means –'

‘That there is a strong connection to Gunter, here and the castle.’

‘And someone making false walls here was making concrete walls at the castle!’ Otto nodded. ‘What year did K2 move into the castle?’

Otto paused for dramatic effect, raising an eyebrow. ‘1965.’

‘Dear God, you don’t think?’

‘Johno found a false wall.’ Otto lowered his head.

‘That’s great,’ Beesely enthused before noticing Otto’s look. ‘Otto?’

Otto looked up, an exasperated expression etched into his face. ‘Johno smashed open the wall, he stepped inside with Thomas ... a metal sheet came down –’ Beesely jaw dropped. ‘- and now they are trapped inside.’

Beesely glanced at the window and then casually tossed the file he was holding over his shoulder.

Otto studied his file for a moment then tossed it over his shoulder. ‘I second that motion.’

Beesely ran a hand over his scalp, rubbed his face then faced Otto. ‘Helicopter. Get Grey and his team, our cavers.’

Otto lifted his phone.

* * *

‘Mr. Grey! Simon!’ The guard came running through the dark, out of breath. ‘Johno is trapped in a cave!’

Grey stopped, glancing at Simon before turning back to the guard. They both stared.

‘Johno is in Zug, idiot,’ Simon quietly pointed out.

The man shook his head. ‘No. I mean, yes, he is in Zug, but he found a secret passage - in the cliff in Zug.’

‘Really?’ Grey let out. ‘Shit.’

‘You must both go,’ the man panted. ‘Quick, to Zug. Helicopter.’

They started the long trek to the surface.

* * *

The mobile phone quietly trilled, getting gradually louder. Pepi’s wife reached across and knocked on a light, nudging her groggy husband.

Pepi lifted the phone. ‘Yes?’ he croaked out.

‘Sir, K2 have discovered a secret passage in the castle!’

Pepi forced himself up, putting his feet into his slippers. ‘Call me back in ten minutes.’

With his wife grumbling into the pillow, Pepi rushed down stairs.

* * *

The passage continued to curve down and to the left until Johno figured they were parallel to the cliff, finding a familiar looking metal door on the right of the tunnel. He shone his torch around the rusted metal and glanced at Thomas.

‘It is the same,’ the boy quietly pointed out, casually finishing off his ice cream.

Johno glanced at the ice cream then nudged Thomas back. They found no padlock, the door leant open an inch, a finger search revealing no wires. ‘I don’t think there’ll be any booby-traps here.’

‘It was Gunter’s home,’ Thomas suggested.

‘Well, *out there* was. A grenade in here won’t make any difference, but people will hear it maybe. Let’s just hope he didn’t want to blow up any unwelcome visitors. Stand back.’

Thomas backed up as Johnno eased the door open, wide enough to get the torch through and check for wires. It was clear, a large red Nazi flag visible just inside. Johnno eased the creaking door open and stepped inside, checking the floor quickly and finding smooth concrete compared to the tunnel dirt. He carefully checked above the door, finding it clear. With a sharp breath he faced the room as Thomas appeared at his side, the boy dropping his ice cream when he saw what was in the room.

‘It’s treasure?’ Thomas whispered.

‘It’s memorabilia again,’ Johnno whispered back. ‘And why do we always whisper when we find this stuff?’

Thomas chuckled as they stepped forwards. ‘Hello!’ the boy screamed, his cry echoing around the room.

Back at the metal sheet Kev leant close to the opening. ‘Hello ... hello ... hello for fuck’s sake!’

Lining the sides of the entrance hung a myriad of flags, perhaps fifty, all seemingly different. All hung off wooden poles, some with ornate golden eagles on the ends, each flagpole angled at forty-five degrees. Anyone walking into the room would be reminded of a Nazi flag ceremony, the placing of the flags giving the visitor the impression that they were the ones being honoured. Below the flags ran a line of parallel glass cases laid out similar to a museum, as Thomas commented, and filled with medals, pistols, photographs, cap badges, caps and helmets. They inched

along, carefully studying each exhibit, wiping dust off the glass.

‘No bombs in here,’ Johno suggested. ‘This was his *special place*.’

‘He came here to look at these things. Gunter’s museum?’

Johno smiled. ‘Yeah, Gunter’s morbid museum.’

‘Morbid?’ Thomas did not know the word.

‘Old stuff, dead people, sick in the head.’

Thomas nodded as they inched along.

‘I like the throne,’ Johno commented, shining his torch beam over it: three steps of faded red carpet, a gold-enamelled wooden seat with a coat of arms on the backrest.

‘Good money?’ Thomas asked.

‘That? I’d think so. Probably stolen off some royalty. The coat of arms looks Polish.’

They turned to the right, peering through the gloom and finding many wooden crates of a similar style to the Czech complex, but in far better condition.

Thomas ran a hand over the wood. ‘It is dry.’

‘No moisture in here, not damp.’

‘No streams.’

‘Nope.’

The first box was hurriedly opened; large leather boots with German emblems. The next was covered, but not nailed down.

‘Why is there no light?’ Thomas complained.

‘What?’

‘No light. Gunter came here, and we are in the castle. Is there a light switch?’

Johno laughed. ‘Don’t be silly.’ Then he stopped dead, turned and walked back to the door. There it was, a rusted

old light-switch that turned clockwise. He clicked it on, six weak bulbs in the ceiling coming to life.

‘See!’ Thomas proudly pointed out. ‘Gunter came here, so lights.’

Laughing, Johnno knocked off his torch, taking in the room. The entire right hand wall of the room was lined with boxes. Mounted along the wall above them hung dozens of weapons. Johnno pointed out, ‘Old to modern, left to right.’

Thomas lifted his gaze. The swords and flintlocks were on the far left of the wall as they faced it, bolt-action rifles in the middle, German MP40 sub-machine guns on the far right, finally an AK47.

‘The last one is Russian,’ Johnno pointed out.

Thomas opened a box, leaned in and pulled out a crown, placing it on his head. It was too big for him, falling down and resting on his ears and nose.

‘Fetching. If it’s real - it’s worth millions.’

‘Millions!’ the boy gasped.

‘And *no*, you can’t have it.’

Johnno inspected a box containing crumpled German jackets, grey and with officer insignia, finding one with medals pinned on the chest. He tried it on, the jacket fitting well enough, Thomas laughing at him.

‘You feeling cold?’ Johnno pointedly enquired.

Thomas grabbed a sub-mariner’s jacket, placed it on and rolled up the sleeves. ‘They smell.’

‘Not as bad as the cave they don’t.’

They advanced further into the room, opening numerous crates and peering in. One held a dozen MP40 sub-machineguns, one a dozen ammunition tins - opened and inspected. Beyond the wall of weapons they found a small alcove and an ornately decorated wooden door.

‘This looks promising.’

Thomas closed in. ‘What is it?’

‘A *very nice* door, maybe for a *very nice* room, hopefully with some *very nice* stuff in it.’ There was no way to check for booby-traps so Johno simply turned the handle and pulled it open.

They stepped cautiously inside across dusty and faded red carpet, along a wood panelled corridor with illuminated vases in alcoves and then to another door.

‘We are in Wolfenstein,’ Thomas suggested.

‘Where’s that?’

‘No, the computer game we play.’

Johno took in the narrow corridor with a frown. ‘Yeah, it does,’ he agreed with a grin. He turned the handle of the far door and opened it outwards, away from them. ‘Dear ... God.’

‘What is it?’ Thomas whispered. And whispering seemed appropriate for this room.

‘It’s an altar ... or a shrine of some sort.’

‘Like in church?’

‘Only if you’re a fucked up Nazi church goer. Since the Vatican supported them, why not.’

Cautiously, they stepped further inside, slowly and almost reverently. Many lights in the ceiling brightly illuminated the small room, some bulbs purposefully adding backlight to the altar itself. The floor offered more faded red carpet, carpeted red steps rising up to a stone altar. Next to it rested a marble font, less the water. What it did have caused Johno to gasp. He quickly stuffed what he found into his jacket inside pocket.

‘You are taking things, why can’t I?’ Thomas protested.

‘You can take small stuff. But if people outside see it, in the town, the police will take you.’

Thomas gave the problem some thought. ‘We must keep it the in the castle.’

‘Good thinking, Boy Wonder!’ They both laughed loudly, stood in their oversized German jackets.

Johno stepped around the alter and approached an area of ornate wooden panelling covering the entire wall behind the alter. It housed full-sized doors with golden handles, looking like an oversized wardrobe, so he pulled them open, closing them again quickly. ‘Wow.’

‘What is it?’ Thomas asked, trying to get a better look.

‘Something that the Russians would be very happy to get back.’

‘It was taken from Russia?’

‘Yeah, in the war.’ He made strong eye contact with Thomas. ‘*Don’t*... say what you’ve seen here to people outside, or we’ll all be in trouble. Understand?’

‘OK, Boss. What’s this?’ He tapped the font.

‘It’s for when a Christian baby is baptised in church.’

‘Ah, yes, I have seen this. Gunter, he was religious?’

‘Yeah, but not in the way you think.’ Johno glanced around. Quietly he muttered, ‘I’m still waiting to find a fucking ram’s head in here.’

In a corner they examined stained-glass panels, stacked against a wall and looking as if they had been stripped from churches, before retracing their steps out to the main room. On the next wall hung maps, old military maps.

‘Someone has graf-eee-tee it,’ Thomas noted, a finger on the writing.

Johno eased closer, a hand on the dusty map. ‘That’s writing. And ... a signature.’ He faced the boy. ‘You know who I think made that writing?’

‘Gunter?’

Johno let out an exasperated sigh, gently slapping the boy’s head. ‘No. Hitler himself.’

‘It is good money?’

‘If it was Hitler himself yes, to the right people. And to historians.’

Below the maps stood chests of drawers, the top draws pulled opened in unison.

‘It is for the woman,’ Thomas noted, holding up an ornate and antique hand mirror.

Johno studied the back of the mirror in the dim light. ‘This looks French.’

‘They took it?’

‘Yeah, when the German soldiers were in France.’

Thomas consider it with a studious frown. ‘When you are soldier, you can take things?’

Johno laughed. ‘No, there are rules. You mustn’t steal from the people you kill. Shooting them is OK, taking their stuff isn’t. It’s called the Geneva Convention.’

Thomas snapped his head up. ‘Geneva? I have been there many times.’

As they inched along the wall Johno explained, ‘A long time ago they had a meeting and decided what was OK in war, and what wasn’t. It’s OK to kill someone dead, but if they’re just a bit dead ... you can’t kill them any more, you must help them or move on.’

Thomas looked confused. ‘If you miss, you cannot try again?’

Johno laughed loudly. ‘That’s it.’

‘Gunter killed many people and took their things. Did he not go to Geneva?’

Johno rolled his eyes. ‘C’mon.’

Stepping cautiously they weaved between dozens of waist-high crates and reached the far corner, finding another door.

Johno stopped and turned, staring down. 'What's behind this door, then?'

'A tank?'

Johno tipped his eyebrows. 'Have you seen a door big enough for a tank?' he playfully challenged. Thomas lowered his gaze after being stared at. Johno twisted the handle and opened the door. Ping.

Diving, he knocked Thomas to the floor, a loud bang echoing a second later. Smoke and dust wafted from the new room in delicate, slow moving swirls as Johno eased up, feeling the damage he had done to his knee and elbow and wincing. Thomas lay groaning.

'Are you hurt?' Johno shouted, checking the boy quickly and lifting him upright.

'I hit my head on the sharp box,' Thomas grumbled, holding his head and grimacing.

Johno felt Thomas's scalp, opening his hand and revealing some blood. 'You're cut. Not bad.'

'*You* are cut bad,' Thomas pointed out.

Johno held the side of his head, a hand covered in blood when he lowered it. 'Sod it.'

'We must go to the door,' Thomas insisted, still holding his head.

Tracing their original path the hapless explorers navigated back around the throne, well away from the door with the grenade trap, and back out into the tunnel, turning left and walking twenty yards to the metal plate. Movement could be seen behind the door, flickering shadows.

Johno eased down. 'Who's there?'

‘Johno? It’s Kev,’ came a disembodied voice. ‘There was an explosion?’

‘Grenade trap. Push through some first aid stuff, some band aids.’

‘Fuck, Johno, what ya up tis? Sit tight and we’ll get ya out.’

‘Ask a manager to come forwards, everyone else clear out for a minute.’

‘Hallo?’ came a Swiss accented voice a few seconds later.

‘Listen, top secret ... tell Otto there is treasure here, a lot of treasure.’

‘Yes, sir.’

A few seconds later bandages, creams and plasters were passed through. Thomas shone the torch to illuminate the cut as Johno wiped his head.

‘Can you see the cut?’ Johno asked.

‘Yes, not bad as before.’ Thomas wiped it, put on cream and a large band-aid in what was now a well-practiced routine. ‘Better.’

3

As Otto and Beesely walked to the helicopter Otto’s phone chirped, causing them to stop.

‘Yes?’ he answered, soon followed by a gasping, ‘What?’ He glanced towards Beesely, trying to remain composed. ‘OK, understood. We will be back in forty-five minutes.’ Otto lowered his phone, turning his head a notch to face Beesely. ‘Johno has ... sent a message from behind the metal plate.’

‘And?’

‘Treasure. A lot ... of treasure.’

‘Christ, you don’t mean –’

‘Yes,’ Otto quickly cut in with. ‘What was here maybe, and many other places. Stolen Nazi treasure that Gunter... stole.’

‘Well, well. Right under our noses all the bleeding time!’

Otto nodded. ‘There were the rumours when I was the small boy. But no one could do anything with Gunter alive. And I never knew of any secret doors.’

They walked on.

‘Well, we’ll soon see,’ Beesely noted. ‘Gunter’s hidden treasure at the castle.’

‘Yes, should be ... interesting.’

* * *

Back in the throne room the wounded explorers immediately headed to the left, through the lingering dust caused by the grenade and to the door with the grenade trap, finding it hung open and splintered in a few places. The inside offered only darkness, Johno shining his torch beam through. Staring right back at them was a huge Panzer Mark IV.

‘It’s a tank!’ Thomas loudly protested, stamping his foot. He turned and slapped Johno on the arm. ‘I said a tank!’

‘OK, smart-arse, you want to go first?’

Thomas grabbed a small box and threw it through the opening. They waited, nothing going bang. Next he threw through a helmet and a flintlock. Again nothing.

‘You’re getting good at this,’ Johno teased before stepping into the doorway, checking the doorframe and wall surround for any more surprises and finding it clear.

They stepped cautiously in and glanced around, illuminating what they could with the torch beam. The room they now found themselves in was massive, almost as big as the caverns in the complex and packed full of military vehicles.

‘That’s a Mark III Panzer,’ Johno pointed out. ‘That’s a First World War tank, that’s the same half-track as in the complex. There’s a Sherman, that’s a British tank - a Churchill I think.’

‘Aeroplanes!’ Thomas noted.

They edged past the massive Panzer and to the right.

‘That’s a ME109 - without the wings. That’s a British Spitfire, looks like it crashed. That’s another ME163, but not like one I ever saw.’

‘What are those?’ Thomas excitedly asked, pointing at a row of mannequins. They stepped closer, now being able to see their breath in the torch light.

‘They’re Roman soldier’s uniforms, breast plates.’ Johno examined the old iron. ‘They look real.’

‘Good money?’

Johno made a face, giving an unseen shrug. ‘If real, maybe worth some money.’

In the torchlight they examined spears and swords, followed by numerous spearheads in dusty glass cabinets – again laid out like a museum. Beyond the cabinet they could now see another ornate wooden door, this one with gold enamelling.

‘Thomas, get that door would you,’ Johno joked.

Before Johno could stop him Thomas had run at it, turned the handle and pushed it open before running back. They both ducked, waiting several seconds in silence, just the sounds of their breathing for company. They slowly stood, Johno shining his torch into the new opening.

‘Be ... careful,’ he growled at his young charge.

Ignoring the useful advice, Thomas grabbed a spear and threw it through. No explosion. Taking another spear he thrust the end into the doorway and swung it around. Noting a rusted old light switch Thomas turned it, the new room now dimly lit. They peered in, leaving the torch on for extra illumination.

‘Roman things,’ Thomas whispered.

‘Stop whispering,’ Johno whispered, stepping in and checking the doorframe.

The room offered up more spears, more breast plates and a golden ‘eagles head’.

‘Now *that* ... could be valuable,’ Johno enthused, examining it.

‘Gold?’

‘Yeah, *and* two thousand years old!’

Thomas lifted the lid of a chest.

‘Careful!’ Johno managed to get out before he was lost for words. He focused the torch on the chest’s shiny contents.

Thomas turned, a cheeky grin. ‘Small things?’ he teased. He dug his hand into the cold golden coins. ‘They are real?’

‘Looks like it.’ John lifted one and examined it. ‘Shit.’ He pocketed it, scanning the rest of the room and the four heavy trunks that looked identical to the one Thomas had opened. Then he lifted his eyes to a map on the wall. ‘Look!’ he gasped.

Thomas snapped his head up and rushed closer, examining the image. ‘It’s the caves!’

‘It’s a map of the complex, all laid out. You see where the Roman sword points at, a lower level. So that’s where

he found this lot.’ Johno shook his head, lighting up. ‘No fucking wonder he went back.’

‘He found this treasure in the caves?’

‘Yep. And probably killed everyone there for it. This much gold would tempt anyone.’

‘Not you,’ Thomas idly suggested, grabbing more coins.

Johno lowered his head and studied his young charge. After a few seconds he quietly asked, ‘Why do you say that?’

‘Otto says it. You don’t want money, only to fight the bad men.’

Johno took a long drag, turning his head back to the map. ‘Yeah ... well, Otto says too much. C’mon, let’s find a way out.’ Muttering he said, ‘Ain’t no files hidden in here.’

‘I’m OK, we can look,’ came quickly back.

Johno chuckled. ‘C’mon, before you break something.’

‘Like Abba glitter balls?’ the boy teased as they withdrew.

‘That ... was not my fault. I was concerned for *you*, to get *you* out.’

‘You are a good man,’ Thomas sarcastically stated, nodding his head in an exaggerated fashion as he went.

Johno smiled widely, stopping and taking a drag. ‘So, Sherlock Holmes, where did the tank come in through?’

Thomas pointed toward the far end of the room, a narrowing and a large tunnel curving down and to the right.

‘Well spotted.’

They walked towards it in dull torchlight; past the ME109, past the skeletal frame of some other aircraft - the aluminium still in good condition - and towards the tunnel.

Following its curved walls they inclined down and to the right fifty yards before finding a solid metal door, two grenade traps attached to it.

‘We are inside,’ Thomas noted. ‘They are for people who come in the other way.’

‘Yep.’ Then Johno noted the soil and roots coming in around the edges of the door. ‘Look.’ He pointed with his foot.

‘It’s plants.’

‘So that means what?’

Thomas tentatively answered, ‘On the other side is garden?’

‘Dirt, or soil,’ Johno carefully pronounced. ‘Yep, this door is buried.’

‘We cannot go this way?’

Johno detached the wires to the two grenades. ‘No, don’t know how much soil. May be able to blast it, but if there’s a lot of soil it won’t do any good, the blast will come back this way. C’mon, we can try the rest of the first tunnel we found.’

They laboured slowly back up the tunnel and across the cavern between the tanks and planes, Johno pointing out and naming many things, and back into the throne room. Beyond that lay the original tunnel where they now turned right.

The tunnel straightened for ten yards before turning further to the right, ending at a set of concrete steps, the left wall of the steps concrete as well. Easing slowly down thirty steps they again encountered a rusted metal door.

‘Are we inside or outside?’ Thomas asked.

‘We’re inside,’ Johno suggested, checking the door. ‘Get ready.’

With the torch held close to the lock he turned the handle with a 'click', took a measured breath then quickly pulled it open an inch before closing it again, a foot against the bottom of the metal door. The lagged image on his retina was of no wires or grenades. They waited a silent five seconds, easing the door open with a slight creaking. The torchlight revealed no booby-traps, the door now pushed opened fully.

With Thomas peering around from behind Johno they stepped into a narrow corridor, similar to the first tunnel, but more carefully chiselled from the rock, not so many jagged edges sticking out.

'Look,' Thomas whispered, finding another rusted switch. He turned the light switch, dull bulbs lighting the corridor, and the steps behind them a second later. Turning back from the steps they peered ahead, finding that the short corridor ended with a wooden door after twenty feet. They cautiously eased along, checking the walls and floor, quite the father-and-son bomb disposal team.

'It is not cold,' Thomas whispered.

Johno stopped and considered it, pursing his lips and blowing breath past a bulb. 'Must be close to the castle, warmed up from there.'

Stepping slowly they approached the wooden door, examining it with the torch. Facing each other they shrugged. Thomas stepped back as Johno turned the handle slowly and opened the door.

No 'ping' came as they held their breath. The door swung open, the room inside lit by dull bulbs.

'Woo-eee!' Thomas screamed, jumping up and down and slapping Johno several times with alternating hands.

Johno just stared ahead, smiling from ear to ear. Ahead of them lay more stacked gold bars than Johno had noted

in Beesely's section of the bank vault. And that was worth more than a billion pounds.

Thomas rushed in and touched a bar. 'It feels cold.' Trying to lift it took all his strength. It dropped to the floor. 'Shit!'

Johno gently tapped the boy's head, whilst staring ahead at the pile of gold bars. 'Don't swear,' he whispered, lifting a bar himself. 'Fifteen, twenty kilos.'

'How much is here?'

'A shit load. A shit load of ... treasure.' Then muttering to himself he added, 'And buried with the treasure are files of great value...'

'There is no door?'

Johno lifted the torch. Still smiling broadly he walked around the edges of the room, checking high and low, round in a complete circle, tapping the walls. 'Solid. This is just a room for the gold. Two ways in, the kitchen or the outside where the dirt is.'

'No, there is another door,' Thomas confidently suggested as he examined the gold.

Caressing a gold bar Johno quietly said, 'Oh, yeah? What do you know that I don't?'

'Gunter came to look at this, and upstairs, the flags.'

'Not for a long time, it's very dirty and dusty. At least ten years,' Johno suggested.

'Why put it here?'

'Good question. Why does anyone hide anything?' Johno posed, making eye contact with Thomas.

'So that other people cannot see it?'

'So who *exactly* did Gunter not want to find this place? And more to the point, why did he give a shit?'

‘Maybe he had looked too much,’ Thomas suggested, struggling with another bar. ‘He wanted something else to look at.’

‘Maybe. Anyway, he knew where it was, close at hand if he wanted it. He knew where it was, those he was hiding it from didn’t.’ He sighed, Thomas not listening. ‘Let’s get back to the kitchen, tell them we’re OK.’

‘And we tell them about the gold?’ Thomas asked, Johnno shrugging.

On their way back the tunnel walls were carefully and diligently checked, no obvious doors located.

At the metal plate Johnno lay on his side, resting in the concrete rubble. ‘Kev!’

‘Here! You OK in there?’

‘Fine. Nice warm draft here as well.’

‘Cold in there?’

‘Not too bad, some heat from castle getting in somehow.’

‘People in reception said they could hear banging in the walls.’

Johnno glanced at Thomas in the half-light as he spoke to Kev. ‘Really? They probably heard the grenade go off.’

‘Careful in there, Johnno.’

‘Yes, mum. Stick some more fags through, there’s a good rescuer.’ A pack slid through the gap and he lit up, propped up against the wall.

‘What do we do?’ Thomas asked.

‘Wait, or find a door.’

‘We use the tank!’

Johnno was about to shout when he checked himself. ‘Maybe.’ The kid had an annoying knack of being right.

‘Can I have a cigarette?’ Thomas delicately ventured.

‘No, they’re dangerous.’

Thomas cocked and eyebrow and tipped his head.
'I said no.'

4

Ten minutes later they were both bored and so tried the throne room again.

Tapping the concrete and moving things away from walls revealed no secret doors. Wooden panels were edged out and diligently checked, dusty flags moved aside and the walls behind tapped. In the alter room they found hollow noises coming from behind wooden panelling, but just concrete behind that, all diligently tapped.

The tank room stretched back a long way so, after a little nagging, they had another look at the gold before thinking about searching further.

* * *

Beesely's helicopter landed in front of the drawbridge, Kev walking to a window when he heard it.

'Boss is back!' Kev shouted. Then he took in the restaurant. 'Oh ... shit.' He greeted Beesely and Otto at the lift.

'Kev, how goes it?' Beesely asked.

'They're making good progress, sir. Johnno says it's warm enough inside, and only the one small grenade mishap.'

Beesely stopped dead, his eyes wide. 'Grenade?'

Kev offered them a pained, apologetic expression. 'Johnno tripped a door trap, minor cuts –'

Beesely's eyebrows shot up. 'He's hurt ... *again*?'

Kev offered an apologetic shrug.

Beesely breathed out hard, shook his head and walked along the wide corridor and to the restaurant doors, Kev rushing ahead and opening them for him. Inside Beesely stopped and gasped, his shoulders dropping. The entire restaurant was covered in a fine dust, the tables moved back, seats upturned and placed on them, dozens of tool bags littered about, cables snaking across the floor.

‘Kitchen staff ... er ... gone for the night, sir.’

Beesely focused on Kev, his eyes narrowing. ‘And?’

‘One threw a saucepan at me,’ Kev quietly admitted, his head lowered.

Beesely made eye contact with Otto.

Otto sighed. ‘It is not so easy to find the kitchen staff. They have a bonus now.’

‘Wait ‘til ya see the kitchen store room,’ Kev warned.

‘Oh ... gawd,’ Beesely let out as they turned right and stepped through an obstacle course of equipment and to the storeroom. Stepping carefully over rubble and trying not to fall or twist ankles they stopped just inside, the drillers halting their work.

The first driller lowered his mask and lifted his goggles. ‘Making good progress, sir.’ Beesely did not look pleased.

Otto pointed at a part of the revealed wall. ‘There is the edge of the metal plate. So when that is exposed, maybe to *pull* it forwards.’

Beesely nodded, pointing. ‘What, gentlemen, is that?’

The drillers and guards glanced at the sticky mess on the floor that was a fridge load of melted produce seeping out.

* * *

Johno sat on the floor, his back propped up against the gold, and lit up as Thomas started counting individual bars. 'No,' he quietly said. 'Count across, then down, then multiply - like three times four times five. Yeah?'

Thomas adjusted his approach as Johno rested his hand on the concrete floor.

'Thomas, come here, quick.' The boy ran and couched down. 'Feel the floor.'

Thomas felt the floor with both hands. 'Warm.'

'Try all across the room.'

Thomas did as he was told, scrambling across on hands and knees. 'Cool, warmer, warm, warm, OK, cooler, cold.'

Johno eased up and put the torch on for a better look. 'There, a crack. Cold and warm makes the concrete crack.'

Lifting off a bar of gold he let it drop under its own weight and bang down on the floor, widening the crack. Thomas copied, struggling with a bar and banging it down hard.

A manager walking through the control room stopped and frowned, lifted his head for a moment as he listened, before shrugging and walking on.

Johno banged down with a gold bar, repeatedly hitting the crack. Something seemed to be happening, the edges of the crack were extending to the edge of the stacked gold. They both banged down furiously, knelt just six inches apart.

'Can't wait to see what's under here.'

'More treasure?' Thomas asked, a little out breath.

'Of a kind.'

Then came the first cracking sound. Johno jumped up and grabbed Thomas, moving to the side of the room. As

they observed in silence a second muffled crack echoed around the room.

Johno eyed the pile of gold; the large, and very, very heavy pile of gold. 'Maybe that wasn't such a good idea.'

'What?'

The next crack revealed a strong shaft of light.

'Oh shit. We're above the offices!' He glanced at Thomas. 'I'm just hoping grandpa Beesely loves me more than I think he does.'

'Why?'

The floor gave way with a tremendous rumble. Johno pushed Thomas towards the door, the ground he was standing on following the gold down a second later. Thomas bravely tried to grab Johno and went down after him.

5

'Sir!' a guard screamed towards Otto. 'Cave in! In the command centre!'

Men sprinted out of the restaurant, Beesely and Otto stepping quickly to the lift.

'No!' Otto shouted. 'It could be damaged.'

They took the stairs, Beesely moving decidedly quick for a man of his age. Entering the corridor to the command centre they were met with the smell of damp concrete and a fine swirling dust. Finding the blast doors propped open they rushed in, along with many guards. At the top of the stairs leading down to the lower level Beesely and Otto stopped dead, peering through a haze of fine grey dust.

Staff and managers were walking around in a daze, grey all over, their eyes peeking out from behind grey masks. They coughed as they surveyed their desks and

computers, all now covered in dust and debris, a smoke-like plume of dust bellowing out from Beesely's office. The people huddled at the entrance to the command centre simply stood and stared as silence engulfed the room.

An odd rumbling noise came from somewhere, almost metallic, just as Johnno appeared from Beesely's office doorway; grey German officer's jacket with red swastika armband, large band-aid on his head, covered in grey dust with streaks of blackened bleeding running down his face. He casually lit up.

Thomas appeared at his side, stood in his over-sized German submarine Captain's jacket, covered in dust and coughing. Noticing everyone staring at them, Thomas took a quick step to the left and pointed at Johnno. 'He did it!'

Stunned, Beesely and Otto walked slowly around the companionway and towards Johnno. Pulling level with him they peered into Beesely's office, then glanced at each other. Twelve metric tonnes of gold bars were sat where Beesely's desk used to be, now just splinters of wood under the gold.

Johnno took a drag and breathed out. 'So ... you're back then?'

Beesely slowly raised a hand and pointed at the gold, but was lost for words.

'It's a shit load of gold,' Johnno quietly pointed out. 'Otto, how much is that lot worth?'

Wide-eyed, Otto stared at it. 'One, one and half billion.'

'That's a new car for me then. Wait till you see what else is up there.'

Otto and Beesely slowly inched their stunned gaze back towards Johnno.

‘Wha ... what is up there?’ Beesely managed to get out, starting to cough.

‘Besides the Tiger tank and an Me109, another ME163 and some weird stuff I didn’t recognise.’

Thomas help up a gold coin. ‘Roman treasure.’ Beesely inspected it.

‘Four or five chests full of those,’ Johno explained. ‘It came from under the complex in the Czech Republic. Gunter fetched it out.’ Beesely stared, his mouth open. Johno continued, ‘Certain Russian Amber Panels.’

‘My God!’ Otto gasped. ‘They are priceless!’

‘Diamond encrusted crowns,’ Johno added, enjoying the looks on their faces. ‘Oh, and one more small item.’ He opened his jacket and lifted up part of the *item*.

‘It’s not!’ Beesely croaked.

‘Cannot be!’ Otto protested.

Johno lifted his eyebrows. ‘Would Gunter erect an altar and shine to a fake?’

‘Alter and shine?’ Otto repeated in a strained whisper, glancing nervously over his shoulder at the staff.

‘Then the one ... in Austria -’ Beesely began, again coughing.

‘As far as I know they’ve contested that one anyway,’ Johno pointed out. He shrugged.

‘What is it?’ Thomas asked. ‘It’s just a dirty old spear head!’

Johno took a drag and faced Otto. ‘Wasn’t someone supposed to be getting married in the morning? Some nice gifts up there.’

‘She will wait,’ Otto flatly stated.

Beesely slowly cranked his head around to face Otto.

‘That’s the attitude!’ Johno approved. ‘Make her wait, she’ll want you all the more.’ He leant over the railings,

addressing the nearest manager. ‘Get us ten armoured cash trucks, would you. And we need all guards on duty... now.’

Still stunned, managers lifted dusty phones.

‘C’mon,’ Johno encouraged, turning Beesely gently by the shoulders. ‘Let’s get *you* to bed, and *me* cleaned up a tad. Again.’

Away from the others Otto approached a manager. Whispering he said, ‘I want that cave searched, every inch!’

The manager exchanged a look, nodded and set off.

* * *

An hour later the gang were cleaned-up and sat in Beesely’s bedroom as a full staff turnout dealt with the aftermath of Johno’s handiwork.

Otto poured out a wine for Beesely, one for Johno. ‘You are OK?’ he asked Johno, who now sat fiddling with a band-aid.

‘Yeah, just small cuts.’

‘How is the pain in the arse?’ Otto flatly enquired.

‘Sleeping, I hope.’

Beesely smiled. ‘You’ve spent quite a lot of time together lately, and still not ready to kill each other,’ he noted.

‘Kid saved my arse in the cave,’ Johno suggested, sipping his wine. ‘Literally. If he hadn’t stitched me up I might have lost a lot of blood - was cold enough already to be in trouble. Kid got the injections from the doctors and jabbed me in the arse when I slept.’ He frowned and

smiled at the same time. 'Not sure if the half-pint enjoyed that or not.'

Otto chuckled.

'I have something to tell you,' Beesely said with a sigh. 'And this is top secret. Would be in lot of trouble if this got out.'

'More trouble than what we just found?' Johno puzzled. 'Got half the crown jewels of Europe in the back room under the sofa.'

'Yes, potentially more trouble, with the kind of people that shoot,' Beesely suggested.

'Oh dear,' Johno let out.

'What is it?' Otto asked, concerned.

'When you two weren't around I put in a call to a worried Dame Helen. She had some unpleasant conversations with her uncle, and others, regarding British SOE and wartime activities, Gunter and Czechoslovakia - as it was then. I spoke to her on a hotel phone, so no one - even here - knows.'

'Get on with it then,' Johno urged.

'Seems that wartime SOE knew about Gunter, and about some of the caves in the Czech Republic. In fact, a commando raid was organized by my predecessors in the American OSS, got caught and sent back - 1947 or thereabouts.'

'They went after gold?' Otto asked.

'And other things, like rockets tucked away. When that, and other sneak operations failed, they worked a deal with Gunter. In return for his co-operation, apparently, the Allies would not go after him and would leave him alone - *and* his Nazi treasures. He co-operated, but did not tell them where it was -'

'He was after the treasure,' Johno suggested.

‘Yes,’ Beesely agreed, ‘and the Roman coins. Not to mention the Sword of Destiny - if that is, indeed, the right one. Seems that Gunter co-operated in removing some key parts of the rocket. No one really knows what happened after that. In 1953 Gunter told the British authorities that his associates in the Czech, Swiss and Austrian Nazi underground didn’t trust him anymore.

‘At that point they contacted me, first I knew of the relative who was a Nazi. They asked me to try and befriend him, but I could see it would not work. I declined the job. Strange world, here we are come full circle, sat in his castle.’

‘Having nicked his money, and now his treasure,’ Johnno pointed out.

‘Drinking his wine,’ Otto added. They raised their glasses.

Beesely continued, ‘Gunter’s interest in me around 1963 may have been that the British and American authorities had leads on where the Nazi treasures were buried - and may still be buried - garnered from captured German soldiers in 1945. They think Gunter wanted to get access to that information.’

‘So, something else of interest still under the ground,’ Johnno suggested.

‘May well be, my boy - we found this. It also seems that later they approached Gunter with a view to him helping spy on the Russians. He did, apparently, help for a while, using his contacts. Last known contact was 1959.’

‘Why make all the fucking concrete walls?’ Johnno complained.

‘I assume that Gunter killed the people in the complex and disabled the rocket, pinched the suitcase bombs and

hid them behind a wall for later use - or sale maybe. The concrete may have been to cover what the complex was.'

'Hardly,' Johno spat out. 'Anyone with half a brain, opening up them doors, would see all the crap in there. And he left all the identifiable bodies there.'

'Oh, while I remember, your bottomless well - dead bear cub at the bottom. So when you dropped coins it hit the bear's fir, no noise.'

'Spooky, that was. First time we dropped coins Steak roared, scared us shitless. How does it connect?'

'Mr. Grey found the drain system, bears seem to have come up it. There's a crack in the wall on level three where the ammo' trucks are. Some treasure there as well, gave it to the Czechs, keep them happy.'

'Treasure left there?' Johno contested.

'Apparently not so valuable, but not junk.' Beesely sipped his wine. 'Your idea, Johno, about dating the concrete, good one. Should have the results soon then maybe make some sense of it. They're still finding rooms.'

Otto eased forwards. 'The experts believe that the train tracks were concreted over to allow easy movement of trucks. I think that Gunter used it as a base for maybe ten years.'

'So, trucks coming and going,' Johno considered, making a face. 'Makes some sense. But he went to a lot of trouble, went fucking crazy on the concrete.'

Otto suggested, 'He may have seen the place as a long term base of operations.'

'Some suggestion of a blood letting with the Czech underground,' Beesely added. 'With Gunter winning.'

They sipped their wine as Thomas entered.

'Hey, short-arse,' Johno greeted him.

‘Grandpa Beesely, tell me about the Geneva con-ven-tee-on.’

Beesely was pleased, Otto surprised.

‘Good to see you’re interested,’ Beesely approved. ‘Especially since you’re Swiss. What did you want to know?’

‘Johno said that a soldier can not kill a man if he misses him the first time.’

Beesely frowned and faced Johno, Otto repeating the move.

‘You explain it,’ Johno suggested with a grin.

‘Johno says,’ Thomas added, picking up the *rusty spear head*, ‘it is OK if a soldier kills another soldier, but if the soldier he shoots is not dead he cannot shot him again or take his things.’

‘Well ... er ... yes, that’s true, but there are different circumstances. If you shoot someone and they drop their rifle and don’t shoot back, and lie down hurt - you should not shoot them.’

‘Yes, I know that,’ the boy protested. ‘But it’s silly.’

‘Silly?’ Otto barked. ‘You should be studying the Geneva Convention in school. I will talk with your tutors! Why do you think it is *silly*?’

‘Because it is OK to kill the man the first shot, but after you cannot kill him if you miss and he is lying down.’

Beesely put hand on the boy’s shoulder. ‘Thinking is not Johno’s strong point, although he does have his moments. War is not about killing people, it is about taking land, buildings and fields. You shoot someone so that you can take the land and the buildings. If you can do that without killing too many people, or damaging too many buildings, then you have conducted a good war. And

afterwards you have the land of the other people. You don't shoot to kill the man, you shoot to try and move forwards and take the land. Understand?'

'I think so. Will we give back to the people the things that are theirs?'

'Some of them yes, some of the things we will destroy,' Beesely quietly explained. 'The gold will be melted, altered and made into paper money. And no, you can't have a bar.'

Thomas handed Beesely the spear. 'You will keep this?'

'Hell no! I'm not long for this world and I don't want to upset the powers out there.' He handed it to Otto.

'Me? I'm not keeping *that*.' Otto slid it across to Johno.

'Scaredy-cats.' But Johno quickly gave it back to Thomas to hold.

'You are the warrior, Johno,' Otto pointed out. 'You should have it.'

'Like fuck!' Johno muttered.

'What is the problem with it?' Thomas puzzled.

'It brings good luck, or bad luck,' Beesely explained. 'Depends on who is holding it.'

'We should give it to the people who lost it,' Thomas suggested, accidentally scratching Beesely's table with it.

'Seems like it's in good hands,' Beesely noted. 'But we'll see how our ... *friends* react to it.'

Beesely's phone warbled. 'Yes?'

'Oliver Stanton, sir.'

'Ah, good. Put him through.'

'Beesely, how goes it at the dig?'

'All done and sorted. Listen, where are you?'

'Just hit New York.'

‘Turn around, fast as you can, get to Zug. Something to show you.’

‘God, Beesely, I’m jet lagged on top of jet lagged.’

‘Guess what my adopted grandson is holding?’

‘Something worth the trip, I’d hope.’

‘Well, let’s start with the *four* boxes of gold Roman coins. Take a trip past an ME163, a Tiger Tank and some experiment German stuff that never saw the light of day.’

‘You have this back at the castle?’

‘Oh yes, been here ... quite a while.’

‘You had that away quietly. Mr. Grey said there was no significant treasure.’

Beesely added, ‘Advance then to some certain *amber* items.’

‘You ... haven’t?’

‘Sure do. Then chuck in ten tonnes of gold, Nazi stamped. Some documents and maps signed by Hitler himself, half the crown jewels of Europe.’

‘Jesus,’ came down the phone.

‘And finish with something that my boy is scratching his backside with, and has just dug a small hole in my wall with.’

‘What the hell are you on about?’

‘A certain spearhead.’

There was a pause. ‘The real one?’

‘We think so, the other one in Austria may be the fake.’

‘And the boy is jabbing it into the fucking wall?’

‘Strange family, so I’ve heard. See you in the morning, over and out.’ He hung up.

Johnno turned to Thomas. ‘Thomas! How will the people who want that back ... feel about you damaging it?’

Thomas wandered over and placed it down. 'I want to give something back.' The adults made eye contact.

'Bored of shooting ducks, are we?' Beesely teased.

Johno kicked Otto's leg. 'Aren't you getting married in ... a few hours?'

'No, she can wait.'

Beesely sighed. 'Otto, you have surprised me with your attitude towards this girl. She sounds lovely?'

'She is. She makes an effort always, keeps me happy.' They waited. Otto added, after a sigh, 'She keeps me happy because she is an agent of the French Secret Service.'

Beesely and Johno glanced at each other. Johno checked the bottle.

'Sorry?' Beesely asked.

'She is DGSE,' Otto admitted with a shrug.

'And you know?' Johno asked. 'And you're going to marry her anyway?'

'Why not? She looks after me, no arguments, no problems, good sex. Perfect.'

Beesely inched his head closer, staring. 'Apart from the fact she is spying on you!'

'How long have you known, for fuck's sake?' Johno asked.

'Since the first week, three years ago now. Gunter always was very careful with who I knew, because he trusted me with many things.'

Johno shook his head. 'You've been shackled up with a spy all this time ... and known it?'

'Yes. It seems ... logical.'

'It does?' Beesely asked.

Johnno laughed. 'Yeah, it does actually. She'll look after him because she's being told to. Does she have a mate?'

Beesely sighed. 'I must be tired, because even less is making sense around here than normal. Kindly sod off, take the little monster, put the spearhead somewhere safe.'

6

Johnno found Mr. Grey and Simon in the restaurant an hour later. 'You missed it all,' he teased as he joined them on a dusty table. 'What was level three like?'

'Thirty trucks,' Simon complained. 'And we looked in most.'

'And?' Johnno nudged.

Grey made a face. 'All ammo' and MP40s. Czechs are earning their keep and TV is filming them removing it, plus the bit of treasure that *was* there.'

'You had a look at the stuff here?' Johnno asked Mr. Grey.

'Quick look, love the Tiger. Reckon I could get that going.'

Johnno offered him a sceptical look. 'Bar of gold if that thing rumbles in less than a week.' They shook.

'You're popular down stairs, I hear,' Grey mentioned in passing, a grin evident.

'I'll just avoid them for a month or two, they'll calm down. Eventually.'

Simon did not seem convinced of that. 'There are people coughing up concrete dust. And the builders arrived down stairs ten minutes ago.'

'Shit, I'd best avoid *them*.'

Simon added, 'And the kitchen staff have gone home until we say it is safe. Seems as if every week now it is self-service. I will bring sandwiches soon. The restaurant in the village loves *you*, Johnno, all the business they get.'

Grey laughed loudly.

'Beesely's office was a bit Spartan anyway,' Johnno suggested. '*And* they're going to put a small café next to it.'

'Ah, good,' Simon suggested. 'Keep you out of here.'

Johnno faced Mr. Grey. 'Oh, while I remember, Stanton here tomorrow some time.' He checked his watch. 'Which is today I guess.'

'Poor fella just landed in New York, he'll be beat. What's the occasion?'

Johnno raised his eyebrows and grinned. 'Certain artefact that Hitler liked.'

'The spear?' Grey whispered, wide-eyed.

Johnno checked over his shoulder then nodded. 'Simon, not a word. To anyone.'

Simon shrugged. 'What spear?'

Johnno rolled his eyes. 'Never mind.'

Get that tank off my lawn

1

Johno placed down a mug of tea for Beesely, the afternoon sun beating through the windows. 'Bit grimy, all self-service. Big hole in the kitchen apparently.'

'They'll have the ramp open soon, it exits just by the cottage,' Beesely explained. 'Then we'll stick a temporary door on the kitchen.'

Johno straightened, a slight frown. 'All the stuff out?'

'No, but they'll take it out the secret passage that *someone* missed.'

'Where was it?'

'Mr. Grey found it hidden in the wall of the tank room. It goes all the way down to the edge of the West Camp, to a cottage that only Gunter was ever allowed into. Been dead seven months odd, no one bothered with it.' Beesely tipped his head and listened. 'What in God's name is that? Are they drilling somewhere?'

Johno peered out the window, a hand over his eyes. 'Nope. That's Mr. Grey in that Tiger tank. Looks like Mr. Stanton in there as well.'

'That'll be good for the grass and tarmac,' Beesely grumbled.

'I owe Grey a gold bar now.'

'Made a bet with him, did you?'

'Yeah. There's ten bars kept back from the hoard.'

'Olly will want one. Oh, Elle Rosen and chums here 4pm today.'

'That poor bugger never gets any peace with us on the case.'

‘Quite the crowd down there. Shall we have a look at the Tiger?’

‘When you’re ready, Boss.’

* * *

‘Minister Blaum?’

‘Yes, Otto? All sorted in the Czech Republic?’

‘Yes, and no. Are you sitting down?’

‘No, standing and worried. You are starting to sound like Beesely!’

‘I shall take that as a compliment.’

‘What news?’

‘Johno found the treasure -’

‘He what?’ Blaum gasped.

‘The Austrian gold that Gunter stole...’

‘Ah, so he did have it.’

‘And four trunks of cold coins, Roman, from the mine in the Czech Republic, plus numerous wartime relics. There are also numerous paintings, jewels and other items.’

‘What about...?’

‘No sign at all - and we have searched thoroughly.’

‘Then maybe all our doubts -’

‘Were well founded. If Gunter searched for forty years and did not find the list, what hope do we have?’

‘Yes,’ Blaum sighed. ‘Keep me informed please.’

Otto hung up. ‘You know what you need to know, Minister.’

Claus waited with an expectant look, stood at a confidential distance. ‘Do we declare all the treasure?’

Otto shook his head. ‘We declare most of the Austrian gold, some of the coins, the paintings. The rest we hide.’

* * *

‘So, the Austrian gold was stolen by Gunter after all,’ a white-haired elderly German man stated, stood in a Turin hotel room with Pepi sat in the window. He paced the room. ‘And nothing else in this secret area?’

Pepi replied, ‘Flags, maps, weapons from the war. A large room with a Tiger tank.’

At that the German stopped, a smile forming. ‘Gunter always did like his toys. You know why?’ Pepi stared up and waited. ‘Because he was a coward in the war!’ the German snarled. ‘He worked in administration, some simple spying work in Switzerland. I do not believe he ever fired a shot!’

‘The gold moved out from the castle is the right quantity of bars to be that of the missing Austrian stash.’

The German considered it. ‘So why have it in the mountain, other than to hide it from *us*?’

‘He hid it from his staff as well,’ Pepi pointed out.

‘It was taken in 1959. He moved to Zug in 1964.’

‘So, the rumours of something hidden at Zug –’

‘May be this gold, and his fanciful idea of his Nazi heritage. Pah!’

‘We should re-assess if the files were ever there, and if he had them.’

The German made a face, stood hunched forwards. ‘Perhaps. I think it would have been found before now.’

‘You know, they found the body of Otto’s mother in the Czech complex.’

The German considered it, stepping to the window. ‘So, he killed her. That *was* the rumour in 1965,’ he offered with a disinterested shrug. He turned to face Pepi.

‘So, we look again at old records. Maybe it is someplace else.’ He stepped to the door and spun. ‘What news of the Russian, Luchenkov?’

‘We will get him out of prison in a few days.’

‘Is everything in place?’

Pepi stood, nodding. ‘The castle and all the buildings will be destroyed entirely. Only rubble left.’

‘Gute. And this English man? The traitor.’

‘All ready, sir.’

* * *

‘Is someone acting like a big kid?’ Beesely firmly enquired as guards helped Oliver down from the Tiger.

‘Damn right. Love stuff like this.’

‘Got a Sherman in good condition if you want it?’

‘Hell, yes!’

‘Have to get it stateside. Heavy, I guess.’

They turned and walked in, Johno escorting.

‘How’s the pain in the arse?’ Oliver enquired.

‘He’s fine,’ Beesely and Johno said in unison.

They took the lift to the top floor, walking through the restaurant into the storeroom then into the tunnel, turning right into the throne room.

‘And this was here all along?’ Oliver asked.

‘Yes, right under our noses,’ Beesely admitted.

‘Well, for twelve weeks under your noses,’ Oliver corrected. He stopped dead. ‘Wow, look at all this stuff.’

‘This way,’ Johno called. He entered the alter room, relieving a guard.

‘Jesus!’ Stanton let out. ‘Gunter had an alter? Freaky or what?’ Thomas appeared from the doorway, Oliver

smiling a welcome. 'Hello young man. You've been having some adventures lately.'

'Yes. Now I can make British Army tea.'

'Excellent,' Oliver commended. 'And your English is much better.'

'Are you here to look at the things that Johnno would not show me?' Thomas asked in his accented voice.

Oliver cocked a questioning eyebrow at Johnno.

'Security,' Johnno explained. 'Kid's a bit of a blabbermouth around here. Some things private, even for the guards.' He opened the wooden panels.

'Oh ... wow,' Oliver slowly let out. 'Those are the original Amber Panels?'

'No idea,' Beesely cheerfully admitted. 'We'll check. But knowing Gunter they must be.'

Thomas handed Oliver a Roman coin. 'This is for you.'

'Thank you, young man,' Stanton said as he examined it. 'Emperor Caesar. Excellent.'

'And this,' Johnno pulled from his jacket, 'is either worth fuck all, or everything on the planet.'

Oliver accepted the spearhead reverently.

'Why is it important?' Thomas asked in a small voice.

'Well,' Oliver began, 'some people believe that this spear is what was used to kill Jesus on the cross.'

Thomas seemed to understand, nodding.

Johnno added, 'And a lot of people, who call themselves Christians, would kill us all to get hold of it.'

Oliver faced Beesely. 'What'll you do with it?'

'What else? Stick in a museum in Jerusalem. Supposed to come from there, so let those who want to believe in it, and peek at it, do so.'

‘Seems like the right thing to do,’ Oliver agreed. ‘No one has it, everyone can look at it.’

2

Elle Rosen smiled and waved as he entered the hastily cleaned restaurant. Behind him trailed two grey haired men in suits, one American, one British.

Beesely greeted Elle and they shook hands. ‘Hope we’re not keeping you busy?’

‘Beesely, everyone morning I look for stories about you - any intercepts. It’s the first thing I do every morning, last thing at night.’

‘Well, we’re going to create a bit more paperwork for you, I’m afraid.’

Otto, Johnno and Thomas were lined up, all now in suits. Mr. Stanton and Mr. Grey, cleaned up and suited as well, stood at the back, Elle being greeted by Otto and Johnno in sequence.

‘This is Mr. Goldman and this is Mr. Levy,’ Elle introduced the two new faces. ‘They are senior representatives of The Congress.’

Five minutes of pleasant greetings and handshakes followed, the two members of The Congress recognising Mr. Stanton and saying hello.

‘OK, gentlemen,’ Beesely called. ‘Before we have some drinks and refreshments let’s get the business over. Czech Republic, forget it - don’t need you on that.’

‘No?’ Elle queried.

‘No,’ Beesely affirmed with a confident smile. ‘We are well on top of the Czech problem. The Czech Ministers were a bit worried you would make a fuss about some Jewish prisoners being kept alive ten years after the war.’

‘Aren’t we?’ Mr. Levy queried.

‘If you want,’ Beesely said. ‘But if you do kick up a fuss it may hurt my organization.’

‘May hurt K2?’ Elle queried.

‘Yes, because we pinched some stuff from the complex.’

Elle tipped his head. ‘Beesely?’

‘Thomas?’ Beesely called. ‘Your turn now.’

Thomas walked forwards, putting his hand on a large box on the table. ‘This is for you to take home.’ He lifted the lid, the visitors peering in.

Elle seemed shocked. ‘My God, Beesely. Are those...?’

‘Yes, they are. You can’t say where they came from, but we figured you’d want them.’

Elle peered at the box of gold teeth, extracted by the Nazis during the war. The visitors glanced at each other, silent for many seconds.

‘These ... were in that complex?’ Elle enquired.

‘No, we pinched them from a Swiss bank,’ Beesely pointed out. ‘Less said the better.’ The visitors glanced at each other. ‘Thomas?’ Beesely nudged.

Thomas lifted three old books and handed them over to the perplexed guests. ‘These are for you as well,’ Thomas formally announced.

Mr. Levy opened the first book then glanced at Beesely.

‘Hitler diaries,’ Beesely carefully mouthed. ‘Do with as you please. Thomas?’

Thomas lifted a shrouded painting and placed it against a table, taking off the sheet. ‘This is one painting, there are sixty two for you.’

Elle pointed, ‘That’s —’

‘Yes,’ Beesely cut in. ‘The Rothchilds should be pleased. We think that ten of these are theirs, the rest from various Jewish families.’

‘They are priceless!’ Mr. Levy gasped. ‘And you are ... giving them to us?’

‘Who takes money for returning stolen items?’ Beesely sternly asked.

‘London wheel clampers,’ Johnno quietly suggested.

‘Thomas?’ Beesely called. ‘The special gift.’

‘Special?’ Elle choked out, pointing at the painting. ‘And these aren’t?’

Thomas brought out the Spear of Destiny wrapped in a cloth and handed it to Elle. Elle unwrapped it.

Beesely stepped closer. ‘We want that to go into a Jerusalem museum so that anyone can peek at it.’

‘What about the one —’ Elle began.

‘Fake, we think. Hard to tell, who cares.’

Elle turned his head. ‘Who ... cares?’

‘You take it, check it, see if it is the real one or not.’

Steak wandered in on a lead handled by a guard. Thomas took the lead and led the bear towards the visitors, Steak promptly biting Mr. Levy’s leg.

‘Thomas!’ Beesely barked.

‘We’ve trained the bear to bite Jews,’ Johnno joked. Otto closed his eyes and lowered his head.

Elle laughed, but Mr. Levy didn’t see the joke, Beesely scowling at Johnno.

An hour later The Congress had departed with the returned art treasures. Now Elle and the gang were sat around the restaurant table, ties loosened except for Otto. Steak lay curled up and snoring after a huge pile of dog food.

Johnno faced Beesely. 'Have you ever had a 'Pearly Gates' dream?'

'Pearly Gates ... oh yes, many.'

'The same one, over and over?' Johnno asked.

Beesely thought back. 'There is one particular heaven dream I used to have, very vivid.'

'What happens in it?' Johnno pressed.

'I argue the case for why I should enter, I think,' Beesely explained. 'I just remember arguing and debating a lot.'

Johnno nodded, deep in thought. He faced Otto. 'What about you?'

'A dream of the gates of heaven?' Otto stated. 'Yes, I have this dream. I am standing at the gates, there are many people and I am checking my shoes and tie.'

Beesely and Johnno laughed at the same time, Elle frowning.

'You check your frigging appearance?' Johnno asked.

'Yes,' Otto said with a shrug.

'It's a Swiss thing,' Beesely suggested. 'They grow up in narrow grooves!'

'Yeah,' Johnno began, 'but how can you equate being judged by God, with having nice fucking shoes on?'

'It's symbolic,' Mr. Stanton offered. 'It's how you see yourself being judged in the eyes of others.'

'What about you, Mr. Stanton?' Johnno asked.

'Ah ... that's a closely guarded secret!' Stanton replied with a smirk.

'Come on,' Beesely nudged. 'I told you mine.'

'Well, I usually dream that when I get to heaven I start asking a lot of questions and criticising the structures –'

'No bleeding surprise there, then,' Beesely scoffed.

‘What you suggesting, old man?’ Stanton asked Beesely, a slight scowl forming.

‘You’ve been a snob all of the time I’ve known you!’

‘A snob?’ Stanton repeated as Johnno laughed. ‘That’s rich coming from the only ... plumb-in-mouth *nobility* at the table!’

‘Got you there,’ Johnno suggested.

Beesely offered Johnno an unfriendly glance. ‘Hardly. Yanks *aspire* to be noble, we Brits have it in abundance!’ He faced Stanton. ‘We should have never given you independence.’

‘Gave us?’ Stanton repeated, Elle roaring with laughter.

Johnno faced Mr. Grey. ‘What about you, Grey boy, any heaven dreams?’

Mr. Grey shrugged. ‘Sure. But I always kill St. Peter and blow the gates open.’

Beesely faced him, a stern look. ‘You kill St. Peter?’

Stanton turned to face Grey. ‘You blow the gates? Christ, you’ve been doing this job too long - blowing up stuff in your damn sleep!’

‘My shrink would love you,’ Johnno suggested with a grin.

‘You kill St. Peter!’ Beesely repeated, a strong glare. ‘Just how the hell would you expect to get into heaven by fighting your way in?’

Mr. Grey glanced around the faces and shrugged.

‘What about you, Elle?’ Johnno asked. ‘Do you know the secret way in?’

Elle smiled widely. ‘I always meet a lot of people I know at the gates, they dress me in a robe and lead me in.’

‘So,’ Johnno began, ‘it’s not what you’ve done in your little Jewish life that counts, it’s who you know already there? Bloody typical.’

‘Johnno!’ Beesely quietly scolded.

‘What?’ Johnno asked with a deliberately large shrug.

‘It’s OK,’ Elle assured Beesely. ‘Johnno is refreshingly honest, he takes the piss out of everyone in equal measure.’

‘See,’ Johnno pointed out. ‘I’m not racist, I just don’t like any fucker!’

‘What do you do in *your* dream?’ Elle asked Johnno.

‘Strange, it’s the same dream over and over, slight variations,’ Johnno explained. ‘I walk through the mist, get to the gates - if you look down there’s just sky. A man appears, looking just like Beesely –’

‘A nightmare then,’ Stanton suggested.

‘- and he sprouts wings and asks me some questions, but I’m always given time to think about them. So a sofa appears, then a table with drink and food, then usually a girl.’

‘And then what?’ Stanton asked.

Johnno shrugged. ‘I wait outside enjoying myself - I never go in.’

Mr. Grey squinted at him. ‘You never go in?’

‘Ever?’ Otto asked, Johnno shaking his head.

‘It’s because you should have died so many times,’ Beesely suggested. ‘Always another chance, so you don’t - subconsciously - see yourself ever getting there, the end.’

Johnno faced him. ‘You’ll have to write that down and give it to Doc’ Manning, it sounds plausible. Better than his fucking theories as to why I’m fucked-up in the head.’

‘We don’t think you’re fucked-up in the head,’ Stanton offered. ‘We know and love you for the trouble-maker you

are.’ The table laughed. Stanton continued, ‘What’s that English saying? Black sheep –’

‘Black sheep of the family,’ Beesely finished off. The table laughed again.

‘Could be worse, you could dream of *killing* your way into heaven,’ Beesely commented, a sideways glance at Mr. Grey.

Johno faced Elle. ‘Did you want any memorabilia for yourself? There’s a room full.’

‘I don’t think Elle will be big on Nazi flags,’ Beesely pointedly remarked.

‘Actually I find it all fascinating,’ Elle began. ‘My degree was in New York, modern history. I wouldn’t mind having a poke around.’

‘Help yourself,’ Beesely offered.

Elle added, ‘Those Hitler diaries will go to a lecturer friend of mine in New York, he’ll be very grateful for a long time. Anything else like that and he’ll be picking up the cheque for years.’

They laughed.

‘Send him that fucking missile!’ Johno suggested.

A manager ran in, a little out of breath. He waited, signalling Otto, quickly whispering in Otto’s ear when Otto stepped up to him. The manager walked out as Otto sat.

‘Problems?’ Beesely asked.

‘Mr. Grey’s team has found the inner sanctum,’ Otto announced. Everyone closed in. ‘There is a giant alter, a large golden Buddha and –’ he faced Elle. ‘- thousands of human skulls, the workers who made the tunnels.’

They all focused on Elle as he sat back, his features blank. He finally took a loud breath. ‘I’d like to see it.’

Beesely pointed at Mr. Grey. 'I want you there ten minutes ago!' Grey ran out. Beesely took a moment, facing Stanton. 'We'll blow it.'

Stanton studied Beesely. 'Let's take a look first, photo it - let our future historians have a chance at least.'

Beesely nodded. 'Helicopters at 8am.' He faced Elle. 'You sure you want to come?'

Elle took a deep, reflective breath. 'Yes.'

Beesely glanced at Otto. 'Help Mr. Grey, make sure we have enough explosives to collapse the caves. Make some excuse tonight, such as ... a gas build-up. No! Say an ... unstable new ordnance, get everyone we don't want in there out, perimeter moved back.' Otto got up and walked briskly out. Beesely raised his phone. 'Get me Minister Novak, at home if necessary.' He waited.

'Mister Beesely?'

'Yes, Minister. Sorry to disturb you at this hour -'

'*You* disturb me ... all the time.'

Beesely took a moment. 'That is probably true. Anyway, we are collapsing the caves tomorrow morning.'

'Why?'

'We found something.'

'Oh I see. Something best not seen in the light of day?'

'Very much so. Would you meet us there at 9am in the morning?'

'Yes, I will be there.'

'See you there then. Good night.' He hung up.

'Novak?' Stanton asked, a concerned look.

'We have his son,' Beesely pointed out.

'You kidnapped his son for co-operation?' Stanton asked with no hint of emotion.

‘No, we rescued the boy from a hellish prison and he’s now going through *cold-turkey*.’

‘Ah, some leverage,’ Stanton approved. He stood. ‘I’ll check my room and catch you for dinner.’

‘An hour,’ Beesely suggested, before facing Elle. ‘You want a room or a helicopter?’

‘A room would be fine, save going back and forth.’

‘Ask Mr. Frieserling or his deputy for clean clothes, they’ll deliver them before breakfast and wake you at 6.45am.’

‘Not like Tel Aviv hotels,’ Elle said with a smirk as he stood.

Beesely stood. ‘Dinner in a hour, get some fresh clothes first if you like.’ His phone chirped. ‘Yes?’

‘Sir, Dame Helen will be here in one hour.’

‘Dame Helen? Coming here, to the castle?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Do you know why?’ Beesely puzzled.

‘She said it was private and urgent.’

‘Oh, OK. Let me know when she arrives.’ He lowered the phone, staring down at it.

‘That the head of MI6?’ Stanton asked.

‘Yes,’ Beesely said with a concerned look. ‘Something urgent and private. Which may mean it’s about that complex.’

‘Another twist?’ Stanton asked.

‘Probably. Enough bleeding twists so far. Still don’t understand half of what went on in there.’

* * *

As the diners finished their first course Dame Helen and Willis walked in, the gentlemen all standing and welcoming her.

She acknowledged Otto and shook his hand, greeted Mr. Stanton and finally squinted at Elle. 'You seem familiar.'

'Elle Rosen, Mossad, London,' he explained.

'Ah, yes, I think we met two months ago. Sorry for not remembering you.'

'It was a busy room when we met,' Elle offered. 'Don't worry, I like to blend in.'

'Really?' she said dryly. 'Not some sort of spy, are you?'

They laughed.

Beesely pulled out seats for her and Willis. 'Have you eaten?'

'No, starved!'

Beesely called over a waiter and she quickly ordered for the both of them as Beesely poured out wine. 'So,' he began. 'Something up with our complex in the Czech Republic?'

'Perhaps,' she suggested after a moment's thought, taking in the faces. 'Are you sure you want to discuss this... here.'

'We don't have many secrets on this table,' Beesely pointed out.

'Well, I suppose it'll kill three birds with one stone,' she suggested. She took a breath and composed herself. 'During my investigations into that complex we found some old files on Gunter, a bit of a worry in some of the detail. We also came across an old rumour, a very worrying old rumour.' She had their attention, the men waiting on her next sentence. 'Seems that around 1972

someone fished up a crashed American bomber from the Med', one that had two live nukes on it.'

Stanton straightened and met Beesely's concerned gaze.

She added, 'And that someone may have been Gunter or a close associate. Add to which the rumour of the nukes being stored very deep underground somewhere...' She held up her hands.

'Christ!' Beesely let out. 'Gunter could have stored them in our complex. Since the dirty bomb suitcases were there, why not?'

'I thought Mr. Grey went right around with Geiger counters?' Stanton asked.

'He did,' Otto informed them. 'Very thoroughly.'

'I'm not saying it's in that particular cave,' Dame Helen pointed out.

'That bloody complex is massive,' Beesely unhappily informed them. 'There could be dozens more rooms we've not found yet.'

'The one good thing,' Stanton began, 'is that those nukes would weigh two or three tonnes at least. They were six foot wide.'

Otto inched his head forwards. 'Nothing of that size could have been moved around the caves. There was no heavy lifting equipment that was working anytime after the end of the war, only trucks.'

'So we may be lucky,' Beesely suggested. 'Anyway, tomorrow we collapse the caves.'

'You'll what?' Dame Helen queried.

'We found a voodoo room with all sorts of weird stuff,' Beesely informed her. 'And we most certainly *are not* letting the world look at that if Gunter was involved.'

'What about the nukes?' she pressed.

‘We ... are just as concerned as you,’ Stanton pointed out. ‘If not more. Personally, I think that putting a million tonnes of rock on top them is not a bad idea. After that, we’ll discreetly search around the edges. Besides, I don’t think they’re there.’

‘Really? Why?’ Dame Helen challenged.

Stanton regarded her. ‘We’ve done studies, they’d be leaky as hell by now, a good radiation trail. They would show up.’

Beesely faced Otto. ‘I want our best two managers on this permanently. If there is a link to Gunter –’

‘I agree,’ Otto firmly suggested, standing. ‘If you will excuse me, ladies and gentlemen.’ He bowed and left.

Beesely faced Dame Helen. ‘You know, there is another rumour about nukes on crashed American aircraft from that period. Isn’t that right, Elle?’ Only then did he face Elle, a wry smile forming.

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ Elle came quickly back with.

‘Me neither,’ Stanton offered with a smile.

She took in their faces. ‘Would that be the rumour that some of the *crashed* aircraft actually ended up in the Negev desert in Israel?’ She faced Elle, a question in her look.

Elle said, ‘You may think that, I could not possibly comment.’

They all laughed.

‘Are you *sure* you’re not some sort of spy?’ she asked.

‘Do you need a room?’ Beesely asked her.

She shook her head. ‘Straight back after we’ve eaten. Early meetings. Now, where’s the memorabilia room?’

* * *

Four helicopters sat on the grass as Beesely and Stanton stepped through the castle drawbridge.

‘Johnno and the boy not coming?’ Stanton asked.

‘No,’ Beesely replied. ‘I think they’ve seen enough of the inside of caves for a while.’

They laughed as they walked on, helicopter engines starting up. Beesely and Mr. Stanton flew together, Otto and Elle in another, the remaining two helicopters filled with agents. Landing an hour later, on the road closest to the main cave entrance, they were met by Novak stood alone.

Beesely shook his hand. ‘Quiet around here?’

‘Everyone has been moved back, just those American bomb disposal men in there. *Apparently* ... there is some dangerous ordnance in there.’

‘So I heard,’ Beesely responded. ‘But I believe that it does not get too dangerous until after we leave.’

Novak failed to register any humour and glumly welcomed Mr. Stanton and Elle without enquiring as to who they were.

Mr. Grey walked out of the complex entrance a moment later. ‘Gentlemen,’ he offered, looking tired. ‘The ten dollar tour is about to begin, if you’ll follow me.’

As the group reached the first metal doors Grey’s men issued hard hats and torches to the visitors. On the upper-level the torches were not needed, a pearl-string of overhead lights now brightly illuminating the chamber.

Mr. Grey pointed at the first metal doors as they passed. ‘That hole was blown into the door by Johnno using a sixty year old Panzer-Faust, equivalent to a modern RPG. He could see that it was the main entrance, but no way out.’

As a group, they ambled slowly inside.

Grey led them to the left, pointing at the train room. 'In here are two miniature trains. They were covered in water for sixty years - so not such good condition.' His words echoed down the vast cavern as the visitors peered through a jagged hole in the concrete.

'Beyond the far wall is another cave, that one slopping down and going towards the chateau, some three kilometres, and then on to the main train track.'

'Blimey,' Beesely let out, making eye contact with Otto. 'Three kilometres!'

Scanning the high roof in sequence they walked on through the massive cavern, in awe of its size.

'In here,' Mr. Grey explained, 'was memorabilia, tanks, half-tracks and jeeps. They've all gone to Prague to some museum.'

The group approached the next set of steel doors.

Grey smiled. 'In here were a hundred or so chandeliers, plus a hundred odd grandfather clocks. Johnno blew the doors ahead using black powder -'

'And blew the chandeliers to bits,' Beesely unhappily pointed out. 'Were the grandfather clocks salvageable?'

'No, sir,' Grey answered, his words echoing. 'Sixty years of damp on the wood and mechanisms. They were mostly binned.'

They walked slowly on, their footsteps echoing.

'In here was a half-track that Johnno used to blow the doors, plus a Sherman tank.' Grey pointed ahead. 'These next doors, they were the ones that Johnno and the boy opened by chiselling the concrete around the hinges. Took them an hour or so of hard work.'

Novak stepped closer to the doors and glanced at the exposed hinges and the old concrete.

‘And this,’ Grey announced, ‘is the office cavern. Here is where most of the skeletons were placed.’

‘Placed?’ Novak repeated.

‘Yes, sir. Placed by ... someone.’

‘It’s OK,’ Beesely told Mr. Grey. ‘He knows all about Gunter.’

Grey glanced at the Minister. ‘It’s been determined that they didn’t die here. They did seem to die in their clothes and wearing watches, but were moved here some ten years *after* they died. Johnno should have realised that when he found some sat in chairs. Dead bodies slip off chairs and leave a mess behind, especially if propped up on a writing board.’

‘Dare say he had other things on his mind,’ Beesely pointed out.

‘An analysis of their bones and hair ruled out Zyklon-B, sir.’

‘So,’ Beesely began. ‘Someone’s idea of a sick joke?’

‘Seems like it, sir.’

They stopped and examined the old offices, poking their heads into a few offices and noting the drawing boards.

‘And the technical drawings here?’ Beesely asked.

‘Fakes,’ Grey pointed out.

‘Well, the bleeding suitcase bombs weren’t fakes!’ Beesely firmly stated.

‘The uranium dates to the Second World War, sir. The cases and the booby-traps date to 1963.’

‘Any finger prints?’ Stanton asked as they walked further in.

‘Yes, sir, but none Gunter’s.’

‘So someone else handled them,’ Beesely noted as he faced Novak.

Novak shrugged. 'It is thought that Gunter was in contact with the underground Nazi movement here until maybe 1962.'

'So what did they want with the dirty bombs?' Beesely posed. 'Use them against the Russians?'

Novak shrugged again and walked on. Next came the village.

'Wow!' Elle let out. 'Must have been spooky to find this in pitch blackness.'

They examined the wishing well, the cottage, a long look around the school rooms and then all sat around the lit fire they found in the 'comfy' house.

Grey explained, 'This is where Johno and Thomas slept that night, this fire burning.'

'Quite cosy,' Stanton suggested.

'Should have smelt it when we first came in,' Grey suggested with a grin.

'Was that sixty years of stale air, or Johno?' Otto asked. Many laughed as they filed out.

The machine room had been cleared of dangerous debris and a path made. Now the tour group stepped through the door, opened up by removing the metal plate, briefly studying the car and lorry before stepping into the suitcases room, finding K2 guards guarding the second entrance.

'This is where Herr Mole died,' Grey solemnly pointed out.

The men took a moment, glancing around at the bland grey walls before walking single-file through the hole in the wall and starting the descent. On the third turn of the concrete ramps they passed through another hole and into the cavern that led to the missile silo. Then there it was,

the rocket, now exposed to the elements and brightly illuminated, most of the roof removed.

‘Just light the blue touch paper and withdraw to a safe distance,’ Beesely suggested, straining to view the nose cone, a hand over his eyes as he peered up.

‘Wouldn’t go whiz, or bang,’ Grey suggested.

‘No?’ Stanton queried.

‘No fuel, no warhead, no guidance system and key components removed,’ Grey informed them as they stared up towards the nose cone of the massive rocket.

‘They were handed to British SOE in January, 1947,’ Beesely stated, noting Novak’s surprise.

‘Which means,’ Elle pondered, ‘that no-one was working on it after that date, certainly not till 1955!’

Beesely faced him and nodded, hands clasped behind his back. ‘Best we can figure, there was no one here - living and working, after 1946.’

‘So it was a lie,’ Novak said to himself.

‘Thankfully, yes,’ Beesely pointed out. ‘Seems that the prisoners either escaped or were killed around the end of 1945. So much for the redoubt.’

Elle seemed confused. ‘What about the watches on the skeletons?’

‘Gunter’s idea of a joke, throw people off the scent,’ Beesely quietly suggested.

‘It was all about the treasure,’ Novak sullenly suggested.

‘A lot of treasure,’ Beesely commented.

‘And *where is* that treasure now?’ Novak probed.

‘We have it,’ Beesely firmly indicated. ‘It will be used well. And while I think of it, tomorrow - that charity you have for raising money for children’s hospitals here - will be getting ten million pounds.’

Novak took a moment to respond. 'Oh. That is good of you,' he reluctantly offered.

'Least we can do, Minister.'

Grey approached Otto. 'Would you like to see where she died?' he quietly asked.

Otto gave it a moment's thought, finally nodding.

They followed Grey down a narrow tunnel and to the small cavern where Johnno found Marianne, the chains still evident. Beesely removed his hat, followed by the others. He tapped the rusted metal plate with his foot and breathed heavily.

'What is it?' Novak asked, a little confused by the actions of the others.

Otto faced him with a tired look. 'Gunter killed my mother. She was chained to the wall here.'

'My God,' Novak muttered. 'The body bag on the second day?'

Otto nodded. Beesely tapped some wires coming from the ceiling then glanced at Grey.

'Explosives, sir. We'll blow the tunnel to the chateau first, otherwise the blast here would demolish the chateau.'

Beesely's eyes narrowed, focusing on Grey, a threatening look. 'Better bloody not!' He gestured Grey towards the tunnel and they filed quietly out, Otto last to leave, a quick look back.

Back on the concrete ramps they descended, a leisurely walk through the third level, all the lorries now removed, finding two of Mr. Grey's team walking down the large cavern towards them.

'All set?' Beesely asked, his words echoing around the cavern.

'Yes, sir,' came back in tandem.

Grey led the group to a hole in a wall and down to the inner sanctum. They met two armed men at the end of the tunnel, part of Grey's team, plus four K2 guards inside with Simon.

Beesely greeted Simon with a slight nod. 'Been here all night?'

'Yes, sir. But ready now,' Simon replied, looking tired.

Beesely stepped into the large cavern, a bright golden light welcoming him. 'Jesus!'

The men eased in and lined up. 'Fuck!' someone whispered.

Grey pointed at a small tunnel entrance off to the left. 'Down there are the original Roman caves. We had a metal detector and actually found a few coins.' He handed one to Mr. Stanton, who carefully examined it. Otto accepted one and studied it in the poor light.

Beesely lifted his gaze. Looking back down at him was a thirty-foot golden Buddha with a six-foot red swastika painted on its belly. 'That's not gold, is it?' he asked.

'No, sir,' Grey informed them. 'Painted on. It's carved stone.'

Elle walked to the edge of the Buddha. The entire wall behind the Buddha was made up of skulls, Elle immediately noticing several with bullet holes. He swallowed.

To the left stood an altar similar to that found in the castle, but much larger. Behind it protruded numerous rusted metal flag holders, the poles and flags removed to Zug. Behind the flagpoles ran stone terraces suitable for people to sit on, room for perhaps thirty. To the right stood another altar, this one with a set of rusted metal cups, then more stone terraces behind it, more flag holders.

'What went on here?' Elle asked no one in particular.

‘God knows,’ Beesely let out. He faced Grey. ‘Any clues?’

‘Not really,’ Grey responded. ‘But there is evidence of ritual sacrifice here. The forensic guys said that it had been going on for hundreds of years.’

‘Hundreds of years?’ Elle repeated.

‘Seems that way,’ Grey offered. ‘Maybe even in Roman times or the middle ages.’

‘Which would give it the kind of credibility the Nazi’s would have loved,’ Stanton suggested, staring at the skulls. He pointed, making eye contact with Grey. ‘How many?’

‘We estimate at least two thousand, sir. Some date back to Roman times.’

Beesely faced Elle, a silent question.

Elle took a big breath and faced the skulls. ‘There could be no way of identifying them,’ he quietly admitted.

Novak stepped forwards and touched the Buddha. ‘I wonder if Hitler came here?’

‘A good question,’ Beesely stated. ‘I would think so. Spear in hand, no doubt.’

Grey pointed off to the right. ‘There’s a cave over there, some rooms with beds in, some cages for holding prisoners ... and a bunch of old butchers knives and other stuff.’

‘I’ve seen enough. Blow the damn thing,’ Beesely ordered.

Otto stepped quickly out, followed by the K2 guards and Grey’s men. Elle turned, glancing back once as he stepped towards the entrance.

Beesely stepped up to Stanton, but faced the Buddha. ‘Sometimes, I think I’ve been alive too long, seen too much.’

Stanton studied the golden carving. 'We killed a lot of the bad guys. Think what things might have been like if we hadn't.'

Beesely nodded. 'Good point.' He turned. 'Let's go.'

The men stood in a line on the chateau grass facing the hill, Mr. Grey a few steps ahead of them. He pressed a button on his radio-controlled panel. They could all feel a slight vibration through their feet, rapidly followed by another.

'That's the tunnel underneath us,' he informed them.

He pressed another button, a siren sounding in the distance for a few seconds, its echo lagging and repeating as they waited. The next button in sequence was selected, a plume of smoke and dust rising in several places through the trees in the distance.

'Lower level,' he informed them.

Next button, a dull rumbling under their feet.

'Level three and the rocket room.'

A large plume of dust and smoke rose up through the trees, followed by the sounds of the blast echoing off nearby hills.

'That was the missile silo.' He pressed again. A more distinct rumble under their feet and more dust and smoke. 'Main cavern,' he announced as he turned around. His men lined up behind him. 'Gentlemen, a minute's silence for those who died in there over the past two thousand years.'

Everyone lowered their heads, each with their own thoughts, Beesely gripping Otto's hand briefly.

* * *

Back at the castle restaurant Beesely and Otto found Johno and Thomas having tea.

‘Visitors gone?’ Johno asked.

‘Yes, all gone,’ Beesely informed him as he sat, a loud sigh issued.

Otto sat as a waiter came over. ‘Coffee, please. Two.’

‘Funeral tomorrow?’ Johno asked Otto.

‘Of a sort,’ Otto enigmatically answered.

Beesely faced him. ‘Of a sort?’ he repeated, appearing tired.

‘I was not happy to put my mother in the cemetery at Zug,’ Otto explained, his eyes heavy and words slow. ‘There was a small park near the West Gate, now it is a company graveyard. I have moved Jane’s gravestone, now it can be visited with a small walk. There is a mausoleum for Marianne, with a photo, similar for Herr Mole.’

‘Seems like a good idea,’ Johno suggested, facing Beesely.

Beesely’s head remained lowered. Now he nodded gently to himself.

‘We’ll take a look in a bit,’ Johno suggested to Thomas as coffees were placed down.

‘No, do not,’ Otto suggested. ‘It is bad luck. Tomorrow morning is the ceremony - we will place flowers. All the staff will be there. I have ordered bronze statues of Ricky and Herr Mole. They will be placed in the guard compound.’

‘Reminders,’ Beesely quietly suggested without looking up.

Johno studied him for a moment. ‘Remind everyone just why we’re here,’ he quietly stated. ‘*And* ... the risks that go with it.’

Johno stood alone, studying the two bronze statues. Ricky stood in an upright pose, his uniform and combat gear clearly discernable in the detail of the carving, an MP5 held 'ready'. He seemed to be walking forwards and looking down at a slight angle to his left. His statue stood mounted on a polished marble base with a silver plaque, detailing a cryptic account of how he died, but not of who he was.

A few yards away, to the right, stood the smaller statue, that of Herr Mole, also mounted on a marble base with a silver plaque. Mole was, however, identified by name. His statue held a cane with both hands, looking as if he was leaning forwards and resting his weight on it, his gaze directed up towards Ricky. Numerous fresh flowers littered the grass around the bases of the statues.

Johno lit-up and walked up the compound road, dozens of guards in suits already making that small journey. At the front of the castle the guards seemed to be stood in a queue, mostly single file. Puzzled, Johno walked past them, noting men in suits and ladies in formal wear, most holding flowers.

Beyond the castle he could now see that the queue went all of the way down to the new mini-cemetery close to the west fence, a good three hundred yards. Limping, he plodded slowly on, joined a hundred yards later by Thomas jogging up in a suit. 'Do your tie up,' he whispered as they walked directly across the grass, not following the road and the queuing mourners. At the new company cemetery they found Otto and Beesely stood talking to others, guards and managers.

The area sectioned off was little more than ten yards square, but offered plenty of room to the left and right of it to add more graves. They walked diagonally towards the new plot and stopped at the side, a twelve-inch high fence surrounding it.

Jane's gravestone from the Zug cemetery came first, then Herr Mole's, but from the angle they were stood they could not read the small inscriptions. Next came Marianne, a large white marble mausoleum that had been carefully inscribed. Beyond the remaining free space, perhaps five yards, and outside of the small plot, a carpet of flowers stretched out towards the perimeter fence.

Noticing that Beesely and Otto were now walking back across the grass, Johno joined them, leaving Thomas walking around the back of the plot. Johno fell into step with them. 'Room in there for us?'

'Room enough,' Beesely quietly agreed. 'But just so you two know, I want to be buried in the village cemetery, Church Fenton, next to the rest of my family.'

Johno and Otto made brief eye contact as they walked on.

'And you, Johno?' Otto asked.

It was Beesely that answered. 'He doesn't care. Cremate him, then make sure no trace is left on this earth.' He faced Johno as they walked. 'Right?'

'Right,' Johno agreed, lighting up.

'And you, Otto,' Beesely asked. 'Should you befall an accident?'

'Here is OK,' Otto softly responded. 'But I was considering something last night. What if we are not here, in control of K2 in the future? What would the new owner of this place do to our graves?'

'Good point,' Johno noted.

‘Leave some money with a local solicitor,’ Beesely suggested. ‘Move the graves someplace if ownership changes hands.’

‘Sounds ... practical,’ Otto offered. ‘Not ... Swiss, are you?’

They smiled as they walked back to the castle.

Endurance

K2 Book 5

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About the series of books

K2 is a series of 6 books. If you have picked up book two, three, four or more - without reading book one - then please put it back down; the story will not make much sense without reading the books in series. They all follow-on closely and previous plots are not re-capped. Later books build on earlier events/characters.

This is a work of fiction, but based on real, current and historic scenarios. All characters are fictitious.

No garden moles were harmed during the writing/research of these books. The author does not advocate firearms as a suitable control of garden pests!

There are many 'facts' deliberately hidden in the book, made light of. 'Many a true word spoken in jest.'

Author's note

'It's largely based in fact. It is written as action-fantasy-fiction, since real life spying is way too boring for a novel.'

Inheritance
Assault
Revenge
Nazi Gold
Endurance
Crucifix

Glossary of abbreviations

P-26/P-27 - Swiss secret sleeper armies

UNA - Swiss Military Intelligence

MI6 - British Intelligence, aka, SIS - Secret Intelligence Service, for overseas operations (non-domestic), aka, 'Circus'.

MI5 - British Intelligence (domestic)

CIA - Central Intelligence Agency, USA, overseas intelligence service

SAS - Special Air Service, British Special Forces (similar to US Green Berets/Delta Force)

SBS - Special Boat Squadron, British, similar to US Navy Seals

DOD - Department of Defense - USA

MOD - Ministry of Defence - UK

NSA - National Security Agency, USA, aka 'No such agency'.

Reported to intercept 'all' the world's text messages and emails.

SOE - Special Operations Executive, British WWII covert operations

OSS - USA, like SOE, WWII, overseas

DGSE - French Secret Service/counter terrorism - domestic and foreign

IRA - Irish Republican Army, terrorist movement

ETA - Spanish/Basque separatist/terrorist movement

Red Brigade - Italian communist/terrorist/crime gang

KGB - Soviet Intelligence, prior to 1990s.

NAAFI - Navy Army Air Force Institute - shops on British military bases.

SIB - British Military Police

BKA - Federal German Police, similar to FBI

FSB - Russian Intelligence, formerly KGB

Special Branch - British Police - anti-terrorism/organized crime

Wehrmacht - general term, German armed services WWII

COBRA - Cabinet Office Briefing Room 'A', used by British Prime Minister for meetings with security staff.

FARC - Colombian guerrillas/communist

British military slang

Oppo - opposite number/close working buddy

Pongo - soldier - derisive

Ponce/poncey - upper class/educated/effeminate - derisive

Regiment - he was 'Regiment' - he was SAS

Rock Apes - RAF Regiment - defensive unit of airfields

Rupert - officer/upper-class - derisive

Beast - punish soldier

Stripy - Air Force Officer, derisive term for ranking stripes

Billets - accommodation/food

Civvy - civilian

Badged - qualified entry to SAS, receipt of cap badge

Best bib and tucker - best suit/outfit/military dinner suit

QT - on the QT, on the quiet

Stag – on guard duty

Austria, 1943.

‘The water has risen!’ a young Wehrmacht soldier shouted though the dark to his unseen comrades. ‘We are trapped.’

He ran back down a set of ancient stone steps, his lamp held ahead of him. The sound of his boots on the old carved stone echoed around the chamber above him, a supervising priest now just as terrified as the rest of the onlookers. Prison labourers risked whispered comments, the guards preoccupied with the thoughts of their own mortality. Ignoring their supervision of the prisoners, the two remaining guards hurried to the steps, a need to see for themselves.

‘We’re trapped,’ echoed up the stairwell. A splash signified a vain attempt to swim through the access tunnel, now flooded with black icy water.

The prisoners edged closer, daring to see for themselves and bringing their lamps closer. Another splash echoed up, another desperate and futile attempt to swim free. The priest soon realised he was surrounded by prisoners, their gaunt faces ghost-like in the yellow light from their lamps.

He could think of nothing else do. ‘Guard!’

The remaining guard knew that he was not a strong swimmer and bolted back up in time to see the priest hit over the head with a rock and fall. He fired upwards from the hip whilst holding awkwardly onto his lamp. A loud, clanking re-load echoed up the stairwell, a second shot without aim, a second prisoner down. In the state that they were in, emaciated and exhausted, any wound would be quickly fatal for the men.

The remaining three prisoners ran into the adjoining chamber, knowing only too well there was nowhere for them to go; they had searched this cave at length for days, their purpose in being here. The guard exited the stairwell and checked the priest, finding no pulse. He ran inside.

Halting in the middle of the chamber and breathing heavily he slowly re-loaded and fired from the hip; three shots, three sharp echoes, three prisoners dead, the last prisoner stood defiantly staring back.

After an hour of pacing, cursing and then praying the young soldier dragged the priest to a small anti-chamber and lay him down. He straightened the priest's legs then, after a moment's consideration, crossed the body's arms. After several minutes of calm reflection knelt over the priest he scribbled a message on the wall above the cleric's body.

Sat with his back to a damp rock face, his knees held tight up to his chest, he watched the reassuring flicker of his lamp's yellow flame. Thirty minutes later he began to shiver, and not just from the cold. He stood. Back in the main chamber he bent over, his rifle's muzzle now in his mouth. 'Forgive us for what we have done here,' he muttered.

England, 2007. The Hunt.

Guards stood and watched as the final cable was attached to the house mains. Spread across the wet lawn stood dozens of metal stakes set into the ground in pairs. Each pair rested six feet apart, cables snaking across the grass to a junction box, a large cable then leading inside Broadlands. They glanced at each other expectantly before standing on the wooden boxes they had already laid out.

‘Alles klar?’ came a voice, repeated over the radios. Guards glanced around at each other, confirming that all were insulated from the ground, stood now on the wooden boxes.

The senior house guard lifted his radio. ‘Alles gute!’

The switch was thrown, but nothing happened. They watched and waited. After a few seconds a man pointed. Then they could all see steam and smoke, the odd spark of light and a faint crackling sound.

The senior guard lifted his radio. ‘Ende!’

They waited a full minute before stepping down, cautiously stepping onto the wet grass, testing it with boot toes. The crocodile-clips attaching cables to the metal stakes were cautiously knocked-off with wooden sticks held in rubber gloves.

Two days later the house guards were sad. They sat facing a lawn that was now devoid of molehills. Their dogs looked on, sensing the downbeat mood in their handlers. All the moles were dead, no new mounds were sprouting up.

‘Intruder!’ a guard whispered, pointing. ‘Get the sniper rifles.’ Guards focused on the intruder, many lying down.

A minute later a telescopic site focused on the blatant invasion of K2 territory, the intruder fixed in the crosshairs. A single shot rang out, the intruder sliced in half, its body

parts sent flying through the air. That was one grey squirrel that would not bother K2 again.

Same music, different dance

1

4am passed and Johno could not sleep. He had wandered through the command centre, the castle, and now stood at the drawbridge having a cigarette with the ready squad, four ex-SAS troopers with two new members.

‘What was it like when the Apaches attacked this place?’ one of the new troopers idly asked.

Johno cracked a tired smile as the mist cooled his forehead. ‘I think the sound of them was enough to scare the Texan into surrendering. Eight of them in a line, coming in over the lake.’ He pointed, but the fog and darkness permitted only the closest trees to be visible.

‘We worked with ’em all the time in Afghanistan and Iraq,’ the trooper idly commented. ‘But not on the frigging receiving end.’

‘I was,’ another man put in.

‘You what?’ Johno queried after a moment.

The man explained, ‘We were hunkered down in cave near the Pakistan border. Yanks got their intel’ wrong and they attacked our position. Smelly Dave lost three fingers, back living with his mum in London a few weeks later, looking for a new fucking career.’

Johno took a drag and peered through the fog, memories of his own injuries surfacing. ‘Tough break. What’s he doing now?’

‘Dunno,’ the man replied. ‘He didn’t want to stay in touch after that. Fucked up his pride.’

‘Find out,’ Johno firmly told the trooper. ‘Track him down.’

‘For your funny farm?’ the trooper cynically commented.

Johno focused on the man, a quick flash of anger evident. 'Some day ... *arsehole* ... you could find *yourself* there. Minus a limb or two!'

The man glanced at his colleague before turning away. 'Twenty seven grand.'

'What?' Johno curtly queried.

'That's the going rate for a British soldier losing a hand these days.'

Johno considered it. 'Not much. Won't last long.' His phone chirped softly. 'Yeah?'

'Herr Johno, we have a message from the Russian, Vladimir. He says that tonight Luchenkov broke out of prison and has fled Russia.'

'FULL ALARM! FULL RECALL! CONDOR!'

Startled, the troopers cocked their weapons. A moment later a siren sounded, red lights starting to flash.

Johno ran inside as guards ran out. From the command centre walkway he shouted, 'Wake up Beesely and send a car for Otto – heavy escort!' He entered Beesely's office and collected an MP5, slapping in a magazine and cocking the weapon ready. He quickly checked his pistol and then jabbed at Beesely's desk phone. 'Warn all our people in the UK, send agents to Susan's house and to Dame Helen's. Get me the duty officer at the SAS barracks.' He waited.

'Duty officer,' came from the phone a few seconds later.

'This is Johno, calling from K2 in Switzerland.'

'Johno!' the officer loudly enthused. 'How the devil are you?'

'Shut-up and listen. That Russian wanker, Luchenkov, he's broken out of prison and skipped Russia.'

'We expecting trouble?' the man asked in a concerned tone.

'How fucking optimistic you feeling?'

'Not very.'

‘Then get on the case. Last time he hit troopers just before dawn. Tell Milward. Johnno out.’ He stabbed at the button. ‘Get me Blaum at home. Wake him.’

Guards ran along the companion way as he waited.

‘Johnno?’ came a sleepy voice.

‘Max, we got a problem. Luchenkov escaped prison - he’s fled Russia. I need every Swiss police officer on duty in an hour, you get yourself some protection.’

‘You think he will come for us?’ Blaum whispered.

‘We tried to kill him in prison - he probably knows that. Plus what he did last time...’

‘I will be in my office in thirty minutes, I’ll call you from there,’ came a resolute voice. The line went dead.

Beesely appeared in the doorway, walking slowly and calmly in flanked by four guards. He sat and pressed his desk phone. ‘Coffee and tea, please.’

Johnno glanced at the makeshift curtains covering one end of Beesely’s room. ‘How long till *that* is ready anyway?’

‘Another week or so, I believe,’ Beesely calmly stated. ‘What’s the alert for?’

Johnno eased up off Beesely’s desk. ‘Luchenkov skipped prison, no doubt with a bit of help. He’s fled Russia.’

Beesely stared at his desk for a moment. ‘So, he could be anywhere. Pocket full of money and some scores to settle.’

‘He probably knows that it was us who tried to kill him in prison.’

Beesely stared ahead. ‘And we wrecked his empire, what we could find.’ He slowly turned his head faced Johnno. ‘Yes, a problem.’

‘I’ve alerted the SAS duty officer and Blaum,’ Johnno stated. ‘Sent teams to Susan’s and Helen’s houses.’

‘Good.’ Beesely ran a hand over his bald scalp, taking a moment to think before looking up. ‘Who would shelter him?’

Johnno shrugged. 'Iranians, Syrians. Nowhere in Europe would be safe for him, unless he's going to ground, changing his appearance. Chinese won't be interested.'

Beesely considered Johnno's words then pressed a button. 'Get me the duty officer, Mossad, Tel Aviv.'

'Middle East it is then,' Johnno muttered as drinks were brought in by a catering lady. 'Ah, you're a star,' he said, grabbing his mug.

'Hello?' came an unhappy voice. 'Who is this?'

'This is Sir Morris Beesely, K2, Switzerland. Do you know who I am?'

'Yes, of course,' the voice responded, now a little calmer. 'How can I help?'

'Boris Luchenkov has escaped jail in Russia and fled the country. We think he may be headed for Iran or Syria – just thought I'd mention it to you in passing.'

'I will inform the relevant people.'

'Thank you.' Beesely hung up then pressed CALL. 'Duty officer, CIA, Langley, please.'

They waited, Beesely sipping his tea.

'CIA operations, Duty Officer Marino speaking. How may I direct your call?'

'This is Sir Morris Beesely, K2, Switzerland.'

Marino paused. 'Oh. Uh ... how can I direct your call?'

'It was you I wanted to speak to.'

Another pause was evident. 'It was?'

'Yes. I just thought I would mention in passing that a certain Boris Luchenkov has escaped prison in Russian and is probably heading for Iran or Syria. Could you be so kind as to let your director, George, know. Thank you.' He hung up.

'Should we wake-up Dame Helen?' Johnno asked.

'What's the time in the UK?'

Johnno checked his watch, lifting his eyebrows. '3am.'

Beesely copied Johnno actions, lifting his own eyebrows in emphasis. 'Then no,' he firmly suggested. He pressed a button. 'Get me the duty officer, MI5.'

'Five?' Johnno mouthed.

Beesely made a face. 'UK security is their responsibility, so let's use the proper channels ... for a change,' he said without looking up.

Thomas walked in, his shoulder holster on, and grabbed Johnno's tea, taking a mouthful. He sat and promptly closed his eyes, observed with a cheeky grin by his sponsor.

'Duty officer,' came a pleasant and detached female voice.

'This is Sir Morris Beesely, Switzerland.'

'Really? A pleasure, sir. I've heard lots about you.'

Johnno smiled as Beesely gave the desk phone a disapproving stare.

Beesely began, 'We have a situation. Our good friend Boris Luchenkov escaped prison and has fled Russia.'

'Luchenkov is on the loose? I'm waking Rawlins.' She hung up.

Beesely eased back into his chair. 'You know, I often think there should be more women in the intelligence services,' he lightly commented. 'OK, when Otto gets here, managers meeting.' He turned his head, focusing on Thomas. 'And move the little snoring monster, would you.'

Johnno tipped back Thomas's chair and delicately dragged it off to one side without the boy waking.

Fifteen minutes later Otto arrived looking fresh and perfectly tailored, the night manager's following him in and arranging chairs, a handful of day-shift managers already back on duty. Most were carrying notepads and coffees. Everyone sat and settled, none looking flustered; this was now a well-oiled machine.

Beesely waited till everyone settled and the room fell silent. 'OK. We're here – and at full alert – because our

good friend Boris is out of prison and probably heading towards one of those countries that may look after him, such as Iran or Syria. Opinions, ladies and gentlemen.’ He gestured towards Johnno.

‘He’ll spend his last dollar to fuck us up.’

Beesely nodded, moving his hand towards Otto.

‘I am afraid I agree with Johnno, though not his choice of phrase. I do not think this man will sit on a beach and *grow old gracefully*, as you say.’

Beesely invited the managers to comment with a sweeping arm gesture. Their looks clearly indicated they agreed, several nodding. ‘OK. Let’s work on the worst-case scenario. What can we expect?’

‘He’ll try and hit the soft targets,’ Johnno suggested.

Otto faced him with a concerned look. ‘Family and friends?’

Johnno reluctantly nodded. ‘It’s now about revenge, not empire building.’

‘Sir!’ burst from the phone, an anguished voice.

‘Yes?’

‘Car bomb has gone off outside the BKA headquarters in Wiesbaden.’

‘OK.’ Beesely faced Otto with a questioning look.

‘German FBI,’ Otto explained.

‘Makes some sense,’ Beesely said with a sigh. ‘They got the credit for stopping the first car with the radioactive ball bearings.’ He faced his desk. ‘So ... it begins.’ He pressed CALL. ‘Alert all Swiss police and military facilities, tell them to expect car bombs. Inform Minister Blaum, thank you.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Get me the Duty Officer at MI5 again, please.’

They waited.

‘Sir Morris, I’m beginning to think I’m popular,’ came the same woman’s voice, being playfully familiar with him.

‘Let’s hope not, not today. Car bomb attacks imminent - MI5, MI6, MOD buildings. Germans have already been hit.’

‘Christ. We’re on the case, sir, appreciate any intel’ you get.’

‘When we know, you’ll know. TTFN.’ He hung up.

‘TTFN?’ Otto repeated.

‘Ta ta for now,’ Johno explained. ‘But I *would not* adopt that phrase!’

Beesely looked up just as ‘Sir?’ burst from his phone.

‘Yes?’ he answered, glancing at the managers.

‘Call for you, Sir, from an unknown source. They say they are ex-SAS.’

Beesely made eye contact with Johno as he ordered, ‘Put them through.’ He checked his watch with a puzzled frown.

‘Sir Morris Beesely?’ came a distorted voice.

‘Yes. And who might you be?’

‘Is there a fat ugly guy with a dodgy moustache there?’

Johno breathed in, tightening his stomach muscles.

Beesely hid a smile. ‘There certainly is. Would you like to talk to him?’

‘Not really. Didn’t like talking with the smelly arsed git before, so why start now. Is he any better looking?’

‘No,’ Beesely firmly answered, still fixed on Johno.

‘Listen, we just killed six idiots who tried to recruit us to do a job.’

‘What was the job?’ Beesely quietly enquired.

‘You were.’

Beesely blinked, then glanced at Otto. ‘Oh. I see. Kind of you to think of me.’

‘Pete sends his best.’

‘Pete?’ Beesely repeated.

‘Guy who don’t like getting shot the fuck-up by an Apache!’ the caller clarified.

Beesely again faced Otto, the two of them smiling. ‘Seems to be working.’ He faced the phone. ‘Your name, kind sir?’

‘Bilbo –’

‘Bilbo, you wanker!’ Johno shouted, a large smile spread across his face.

‘Hey, ugly fuck,’ came from the phone.

‘You can kiss each other later,’ Beesely suggested. ‘Right now we are in the middle of a small war. I will need the details of the people trying to hire you - ’

‘Bulgarian, sir.’

‘Where are you, exactly?’ Beesely enquired.

‘Bulgaria,’ came a teasing voice.

Beesely rolled his eyes as Otto lent towards the phone. ‘Are you near Sofia?’ Otto asked.

‘Yep.’

‘Give me your address and we will send a team for the bodies and forensics in ten minutes.’ Bilbo gave the address. ‘Leave the bodies and their IDs,’ Otto suggested. ‘You can leave.’

‘Present yourselves in Switzerland, gentlemen,’ Beesely firmly encouraged. ‘Go to the town of Zug, we’ll spot you first. There’ll be a reward waiting for you here. We’ll send a helicopter if you like.’

‘Sounds good, but do we have to put-up with Johno?’

Everyone except Johno laughed.

‘Not if you don’t want to,’ Beesely offered, a glance at his offspring. ‘See you later.’ He hung up and faced Otto. ‘Top speed on those forensics, it’s our best lead.’

A manager took a call. ‘No Apaches,’ he informed the room. ‘Heavy fog.’

Otto responded, ‘It will clear in the morning, maybe eight o’clock.’

Johno faced the managers. ‘Do we have that new software running, the thing to warn all staff at the same time?’

‘Yes,’ a manager responded.

Johno said, 'Then warn everyone to expect attacks at home, especially car bombs. Zug is a prime target.' The manager trotted out.

'Don't like the sound of that,' Beesely admitted, running a hand over his bald scalp.

'He must know where our staff live,' Johno quietly insisted. Managers glanced at each other, concerned. 'And the bank locations.'

Beesely faced Otto. 'Assume car bomb attacks for the banks imminent.'

Otto sharply called the names of two managers and they bolted out.

'Sir?' buzzed from the phone.

'Yes.'

'Car bomb found in London, near the Guards barracks.'

'OK.' He eased back. 'Hell and damnation,' he whispered.

Otto sat on the cabinet, looking glum. Johno paced and the managers quietly took calls and gave orders.

'OK, let's wake up the gang,' Beesely reluctantly stated five minutes later. He pressed CALL. 'Dame Helen at home, please.'

'I'll do Susan,' Johno offered, lifting his phone and stepping out.

Beesely waited.

'Hello?' came a faint and dry voice.

'Helen, it's Beesely, get up and get dressed. Same for your family.'

'What ... what is it?'

'Luchenkov is on the loose, car bombs going off all over-' A burst of machine-gun fire could be heard in the background, Beesely jumping up. 'Helen!' he screamed before the line went dead, Otto closing in on the phone as if he might actually reach down the phone line and help her.

Dame Helen jumped out of bed but stayed low. Mike now sat up, so she grabbed an arm and dragged him off the bed, Mike landing on the floor with a thud. 'Get Tabitha,' she forcefully whispered, pushing him towards the door.

Mike crawled out of their bedroom on all fours as Dame Helen went to the window, peering through a crack in the curtains. A car had stopped at an odd angle at the end of her semi-rural street, in the bend of the road. Its doors hung open and she could just make out someone lying on the floor. Two men came into view from the right, firing long continuous bursts at the car. A burst came back from the car before more firing from the men. Another two men appeared in the road, this time from the left, running across and firing at the car. As Dame Helen watched, bedroom lights were coming on in the nearby houses. Dogs started barking.

The four men in dark clothes closed in on the car, firing short bursts. Stood little more than a few feet from the car they emptied their magazines into it and then re-loaded. She could hear them talking; not English. Then they turned and ran straight towards her house.

She reached the landing in a second, grabbing her nightgown and pushing Mike towards the stairs, desperately encouraging them to move faster. They all slid down the stairs on their bums in one big heap before rushing for the back door. She winced in agony, her leg not fully recovered from being fractured and still clamped with a plastic cast.

A bang on the back door was followed by, 'Dame Helen? K2!'

She pushed past Mike and unlocked it, tearing at it to get it open.

'Say inside,' the man said, a slightly accented voice that was very welcoming and familiar. Another man appeared and they pushed inside.

'There are four men in the street!' she whispered.

‘Yah, it’s us,’ the man calmly informed her as he pushed past and went for the front door, unlocking it and opening it, the four men who had fired on the car now running in. ‘Wipe your feet!’

‘Any chance of a cuppa, love?’ the first man asked.

‘You’re British!’ she whispered.

‘Ex-SAS, love. Saw you over at the castle. So, how about that bleeding cuppa?’ He was stunned to find himself being hugged and kissed on the cheek, watched by his bemused colleagues.

* * *

Johno had been on the phone to an annoyed Susan when Beesely had screamed Helen’s name.

‘What is it?’ Susan bellowed. ‘Is Helen OK?’

‘She’s under attack! Get your family to a neighbour’s house. Now!’ He hung up and stepped around to Beesely, a terrified look.

‘Get her back!’ Beesely shouted at the phone.

His office fell deathly silent. The managers were on their feet, all watching the inanimate phone. Ringing could be heard.

‘Yes?’ came a dry whisper.

‘Helen?’ Beesely called.

‘Yes, calm down.’

‘What happened?’ Beesely asked, calmer now.

‘Your boys are here, six of them.’ Managers smiled and straightened. ‘They just woke up half of Kent dispatching a car-full of ... well, who are they anyway?’

‘Sent by our good friend Boris to finish the job he started, I’m afraid,’ Beesely stated as he sat. ‘Car bombs going off all over – Germany, London.’

‘Well, if you’ll get off the line I have some work to do. And Beesely ... thanks. Again.’ The line went dead.

Beesely took a very long and very big breath, rubbing his face. He shook-off the shock and pressed a button. 'Oliver Stanton.' Everyone sat, many sighing.

'Susan's on her way to a neighbours,' Johnno informed him, Beesely nodding his understanding and showing his relief.

'Beesely, you woke me ... again,' came the authoritative and cultured voice of Oliver Stanton, Chairman of The Lodge. 'Just put my head down!'

'You won't be sleeping any this night.'

'Christ, what now?' Stanton sighed.

'Boris Lucheknov has escaped jail in Russia and has skipped the country.'

'He what?' Oliver shouted. 'How the hell did they let that happen?'

'He probably had some help!' Johnno shouted.

'Hey, Johnno,' Oliver sullenly called. 'You mean he bribed some damned official.'

Johnno stepped closer. 'Not only that, he's been planning this for a week or two. Car bombs have gone off in Germany, they found one in London and someone just tried to kill Dame Helen.'

'Is she OK?' Oliver asked, concern in his voice.

'We got there first,' Beesely pointedly answered. 'Listen, I want Boris to be the planet's most wanted an hour from now and over every airwave. We think he's heading south.'

'South?' Oliver repeated. 'Middle East?'

Beesely gave a slow, 'Yep.' Then added, 'We know he has friends there. Oh, we already told the CIA duty officer and Mossad, save you the cost of the call.'

'OK, I'm on the case, coffee for one,' Stanton grumbled. 'Talk in an hour.' He hung up.

'Sir?' came from the phone immediately.

Beesely responded with an irate, 'Yes.'

'Car bomb in Paris, sir, outside the DGSE headquarters.'

Beesely faced Otto, both puzzled. 'Rather wide of the mark there. Bloody French should not be on his list, they helped with the attack on us.'

Otto pointed at a manager. 'Send a convoy for my fiancé.' The manager stepped quickly out.

Johnno stepped closer. 'Is that ... wise?' he asked as he glanced at Beesely, who now stood and directed Johnno and Otto to the end of his office. They huddled around the sleeping Thomas. Johnno and Beesely waited, expectant looks at Otto.

Otto glanced at the faces then shrugged. 'It is time this is dealt with,' he whispered.

Johnno glanced at Beesely, then back to Otto. '*Dealt* ... with?'

Otto took a reflective breath, running a hand down his tie. 'Regardless of how this got started, we are a couple ... she is four month's pregnant. And ... *things* ... are more dangerous than before.'

Johnno raised his eyebrows in theatrical concern. 'Lot more fucking dangerous,' he whispered.

'Well,' Beesely began. 'How you do plan to ... you know... handle this?'

'I thought you might do the talking,' Otto told Beesely. 'You are better ... with people, than I am.'

'Oh.' Beesely straightened and glanced at Johnno. Otto could not tell who was more surprised. Beesely said, 'Of course, I'll ... er ... do what I can, have a chat to her. Do you think she will ... defect to our side?'

'I bloody well hope so!' Otto said in a forced whisper. 'We are half way through decorating a new apartment. And we have bought all the things for the baby!'

Beesely offered him two flat hands, glancing at Johnno. 'We'll sort it. Have faith.'

They turned and walked back, Johnno muttering, 'All we need is a lull in the fighting.'

Thomas turned over, passed wind and started snoring.

‘He’s his father’s boy,’ Beesely commented, scowling at Johnno.

‘Hang on?’ Johnno said with a studious look. Everyone focused on him. ‘What day is it?’

‘Saturday –’ Beesely began.

‘Not any more,’ Otto cut in. ‘Now it is Sunday.’

‘Sunday morning?’ Johnno queried. ‘Who the fuck would start a car bomb campaign on a Sunday morning – with no one about to get hurt?’

Beesely eased back, looking perplexed, as did the rest. ‘You’re right. The streets will be empty in London, no casualties. How very odd.’

‘Not really,’ Johnno suggested with a wistful sigh. ‘They attacked in daylight last time.’

‘A distraction!’ Otto loudly proclaimed.

‘Yes. But from what?’ Beesely reflected.

Johnno inched closer to the desk. ‘From something that is probably a heck of a lot nastier than a dirty bomb!’

Manager’s stood.

Beesely followed suit. ‘A nuke?’

‘A small Russian nuke,’ Johnno began. ‘Stolen to order with the complicity of the Russian Military.’

‘What?’ Otto gasped.

‘Think about it,’ Johnno encouraged. ‘They get to do to us what they’ve always wanted, but with no retaliation. They blame *him*, Luchenkov.’

Otto shook his head. ‘I still do not think that the Russians desire a conflict, they have too much invested in the West.’

‘Let’s hope you’re right,’ Beesely quietly let out. ‘But whatever he has planned, I’d bet the farm that it’s not a few lame car bombs.’

He sat and faced Johnno, waving down the managers ‘OK, face fungus, you came up with the idea. What do you reckon he has planned?’

Johno faced the managers. ‘All of you, get to your desks, get on the internet and find out if there are any large crowd events in London today. And then for Switzerland and Germany.’

They glanced at Beesely, who waved them out. The managers walked briskly out as Otto fired up the desk computer and started Google. With Beesely watching he entered ‘LONDON EVENTS 22 AUGUST’ and clicked on the SEARCH button.

Five minutes later a manager came back in. ‘Sir, there is a concert in Hyde Park – estimated fifty thousand. And a boat race at 3pm on the river Thames.’

Otto studied his screen. ‘Yes, these are the biggest events.’

‘Hyde Park,’ Johno suggested from where he now sat. ‘The boat race will have people spread out, not concentrated.’

Managers started to file back in as Beesely pressed CALL. ‘Metropolitan Police Chief, at home please.’ As he waited, managers settled again.

‘Hello?’ came a croaky, half-asleep voice.

‘Mr. Tennent?’

‘Yes? Who’s this?’

‘My name is Sir Morris Beesely –’

‘Beesely? From Switzerland?’

‘Yes, Commissioner. Are you fully awake?’

‘Why are you waking me up? Is this un-official or something?’

‘No, quite official. Your boys have already found a car-bomb in London, more to be expected today plus a large scale attack on the Hyde Park concert, possibly chemical or biological. And we haven’t ruled out the use of a small nuke.’

‘What?’ came back in a strained whisper.

‘I’m afraid our good friend Boris Luchenkov has escaped prison and fled Russian. He’s setting off bombs all

over Europe and about to spoil your day off, Commissioner.'

'My God.'

'Here's a suggestion for you. Close London today - *all* of it!'

'What? Are you crazy?'

'We don't think Luchenzov has secured a nuclear device, but we're still looking into that.'

'Nuclear?'

'Why don't you get to your office and see what's happening. Call me later, yes?' He hung up.

'You enjoyed that,' Johnno suggested. 'Frightening the poor copper.'

'Sir?' came from the desk phone.

'Yes.'

'We have the IDs from the dead men in Bulgaria.'

'Bring them in.' He faced Otto. 'It's our best lead, so all resources on it.'

3

Marco was not official K2, he was a civilian with a shop in Zug. But like many on the payroll he got a text message when the alert went out. Now he stood perched on the balcony of his apartment with a night-sight and a pair of binoculars. He noticed his neighbour and waved, the man also K2.

A car turned the corner and drove down their road towards the shops at the end. It slowed before speeding up, finally halting outside a block of flats. Two men jumped out and ran off, leaving the car doors wide open.

Marco bolted down the stairs a second later, phone in hand. 'Car bomb! Apartment building, end of Bahnhof Strasser! Two men ran off, car open. They are running to the east.' He ran as fast as he could towards the car, a seventy-

five yard sprint, and towards the open driver's door. He could hear distant, indistinct shouts as he climbed in.

The keys were in the ignition. With the door still open he started the car, fumbling with manual gears before speeding off with a screech loud enough to wake everyone for several streets. He drove straight ahead, fumbling to get second gear and picking up speed. As the bend in the road neared he made his choice. Through a wooden cattle-fence he crashed at speed, bumping across the hard dry grass and across the field.

The explosion was so loud that it was not only heard by the compound guards, it was felt. Zug was now awake, thoroughly awake.

* * *

'Car bomb! Car bomb!' burst from the desk phone. 'Perimeter attack!' Managers jumped up and ran out.

Beesely pressed a button. 'I want Zug closed off, all roads, and a five mile exclusion zone.'

He and Johnno stood simultaneously, stepping to Otto.

'Where's your woman's convoy coming in?' Johnno delicately broached.

Otto lifted his phone and enquired, directing the convoy the long way around and to the rear of the camp.

A manager stepped back in. 'Sir.' Pausing, he took a measured breath. 'One of our people in Zug, he saw the car abandoned and jumped into it, drove it into a field before....' The manager lowered his head.

'Fuck!' Johnno slowly let out, turning away. He kicked a cabinet.

'His name was ... Marco,' the manager informed them, his head still lowered as he turned and stepped out.

* * *

Marco lifted his head and groaned before setting about pulling grass, dirt and blood from his aching nose. Fumbling, he eased up onto his knees and then stood, his ankle not wanting to take the weight.

Turning around he faced the burning car from where he had landed after jumping clear. He stood breathing heavily, his ears ringing. Distorted footsteps came from behind him, boots of men running along the road, his neighbour calling his name as four K2 guards ran to him. It sounded like he was underwater.

They stopped dead in front of him, looking him over before glancing at the wreckage of smouldering car, which was now twenty yards across the field and in a ditch. A burst of machine gun fire caught their attention, all now turning to face the town. One raised his phone and shouted for an update as Marco stumbled forwards.

* * *

‘Machine gun fire in Zug!’ burst from the desk phone.

Beesely and Otto sat, calling up the sensor grid.

‘Sir?’ came from the phone.

‘Yes?’

‘The man who moved the car bomb in Zug ... he is alive.’

‘Alive?’ Beesely repeated. ‘Seriously injured?’

‘No, sir. He jumped clear.’

Beesely glanced at Otto then turned to make eye contact with Johnno.

Johnno tipped his head and smiled. ‘Good man,’ he loudly approved.

Beesely faced the phone. ‘Bring him to me.’

‘Yes, sir.’

The spy who came in from the kitchen

1

Twenty minutes later Otto's fiancé was escorted into Beesely's office. Johnno greeted her in French and then both shook and kissed her hand, adding in English: 'You're every bit as beautiful as Otto described.' She blushed. 'And you don't give him any hassle. Do you have a sister?'

Otto stepped closer. 'If she did, I would protect the poor girl from *you*.'

Johnno grinned as Otto presented Marie to Beesely. 'Herr Beesely, may I present my fiancé, Marie.'

Beesely had stood as she had entered and now closed the distance, shaking her hand and considerably gesturing her towards a seat. 'Would you like anything?'

'I am OK for the moment,' she answered, a soft French accent and near perfect English. She glanced twice at Thomas sat sleeping in the corner. Beesely and Otto sat, Johnno tucking his MP5 out of sight.

'Apologies, my dear, for the circumstances of our first meeting,' Beesely offered.

'What is happening?' she asked, seemingly nervous for a DGSE spy. Or maybe that was part of the act, Johnno considered as he studied her.

Beesely explained, 'The Russian who attacked our bank before, Boris Luchenkov, has escaped prison in Russia and fled the country – now seemingly intent on revenge against us.'

'Revenge?' she queried.

Beesely glanced at Otto. 'There is a great deal you don't know about what we do, and we understand that Otto does not ... *inform* you of day-to-day operations.' She glanced from face to face and waited. Beesely eased back in his chair and took a breath. 'We have some things to discuss, young lady, about your future with Otto.'

She focused on Otto, who now sat facing her like a K2 employer, and not her fiancé. ‘My future?’ she repeated, one hand cradling her stomach bulge.

‘First,’ Beesely began, ‘I would like to assure you that you are in no danger –’

‘Two agents shot!’ burst from the phone. ‘On the road to Zurich. We stopped another car bomb, sir.’

‘Thank you,’ Beesely said towards the phone, before focusing again on Marie. ‘Well, when I say *no danger*, I mean no danger from us, K2, no matter what happens today ... or what you choose to do with your future.’

‘I don’t understand, sir. What choices about my future? When I went to bed last night I had a fiancé and a baby on the way!’

Beesely glanced at Johnno, who lowered his gaze. ‘We know who you really are.’ He waited.

She reddened around the cheeks a little, glancing briefly at Otto, who sat looking at his shoes. ‘Who I am, sir?’

‘French Secret Service,’ Johnno calmly stated.

She stared directly at Beesely, looking terrified.

‘You have nothing to fear, young lady. Any time you request it you can be transported to Paris, or back to your apartment in Zurich. You will not be harmed.’

‘Did you find out today?’ she asked, now somewhat more composed.

‘No,’ Beesely answered. ‘Otto has always known.’

She faced him, surprised. ‘You did?’

Otto nodded, seeming a little embarrassed.

‘Why go along with it?’ she asked Otto directly, clearly puzzled.

Otto swallowed. ‘At first ... Gunter wanted me to keep an eye on you,’ Otto delicately explained. ‘But after ... after I liked you and wanted to stay with you. Gunter did not object because he believed I was giving you false information about us, which pleased him.’

‘And were you?’ she asked.

‘At the beginning,’ Otto admitted. ‘After some months I was just careful in what I said. And careful in what I took home.’

‘Oh,’ she let out, glancing from one face to the next. ‘And what will happen to me now?’

‘Now you decide,’ Johno told her.

‘Decide what?’ she puzzled.

Johno answered, ‘Decide if you want to stay with Otto, knowing that we know. And that you know ... *we know* ... about you.’

Otto glared at Johno as Marie faced Beesely.

Beesely offered her a large gallic shrug. ‘Otto has known for three years, so another three won’t bother him. Or us. Otto wishes to marry you and raise the child, so I dare say he is quite fond of you. What matters, is what *you* wish to do, given that this is now out in the open.’

She frowned slightly. ‘You are not concerned ... that I work for the French Government?’

‘Not especially, my dear,’ Beesely admitted in a resigned tone. ‘We have ... bigger problems.’

As if by divine timing his desk phone burst to life. ‘Sir, car bomb intercepted in Bern.’

‘Thank you.’ Beesely eased back and waited, Marie staring at the phone.

‘Otto would like, very much, for you to stay,’ Johno informed her. ‘All relationships have their secrets and problems, yours is no different to most.’ Everyone focused on him. ‘OK,’ he admitted after taking in their looks. ‘It’s a bit odd. But compared to some couples, you being a spy *is* a small problem. I wouldn’t kick you out of bed.’

‘Johno?’ Otto quietly called, a scolding look.

‘You know what I mean,’ Johno quickly added. ‘There are worse problems you could face.’

‘Quite,’ Beesely interrupted.

‘Sir?’ burst from the phone.

‘Yes?’ Beesely answered.

‘Sir, a high-ranking delegation from the French is on its way, they will be here in twenty minutes.’

‘OK.’ Beesely jabbed a button, lifting his head to Marie. ‘This visit has nothing to do with you, I am ... reasonably sure.’

Johno eased forwards in his seat and towards Marie. ‘Are you in regular contact with them, if you don’t mind me asking?’

She studied him for a moment. ‘No. And I was never DGSE. I was recruited for this ... task, in university.’

Beesely lowered his head and sighed. ‘What hold do they have over you?’ he knowingly enquired, suddenly saddened.

She also lowered her head. ‘In university I took some drugs ... drove my car and killed an old man,’ she softly admitted. ‘I should have got six years in prison.’

‘Standard recruitment tactics,’ Beesely commented. Then he offered, ‘We could make that go away.’

She lifted her head. ‘Why?’ she coldly asked.

‘Because Otto means a lot to us, and you mean a lot to him,’ Beesely stated. ‘It’s that simple. You look after him, he looks after me.’

‘Who looks after me?’ Johno asked.

Thomas, still asleep in the chair at the end of the office, mumbled something and turned over.

‘He does,’ Beesely said, pointing.

‘Wanna swap?’ Johno asked.

‘No,’ Beesely firmly replied. ‘You two are a match made in heaven. All the rotten eggs in one basket!’

Marie allowed herself a smile. ‘I have heard much of you,’ she told Johno. ‘Otto does a very good impression of you.’

Johno pointed at Otto whilst addressing Marie. ‘He ... does an impression of me?’

She tried to suppress a grin. ‘He has the fake moustache... and he does the accent very well.’

Johnno focused on Otto. 'Oh, he does ... does he?'

'To business,' Beesely interrupted. 'Marie, you do not have to make up your mind right now, but we would like you to join the family.'

'Family?'

'This'll be awkward,' Johnno muttered.

Beesely faced Otto, a slight shrug issued. Otto shrugged back. Beesely straightened, running a hand down his tie. 'Marie, Otto is my son.'

She stared back for several seconds, her brow creasing. 'No, he cannot be.'

'I am,' Otto informed her. 'And so is the ugly man next to you.' Johnno waved and smiled, childlike.

'You seem more shocked than when we confronted you for being a spy,' Beesely pointed out.

'How can this be?' she queried.

Johnno explained, 'In 1963 Gunter sent his new young wife to England to try and recruit Beesely, Otto was the result. Then Gunter killed Otto's mother, raising him as his own – but cutting him out of the will. Gunter met with an ... *accident* and the will disappeared. Now *we* are here.'

She straightened, surprised. 'This was a British Intelligence manoeuvre?'

'Nope,' Johnno teased. 'This was an Otto manoeuvre. He planned the *whole* thing.'

She faced him, shocked. 'I would not have believed it.'

Now Otto straightened, his professional Swiss pride obviously stung. 'Why?' he firmly demanded.

'You are ... so quiet. So soft.'

'Soft?' Otto repeated, clearly not happy with the label.

Johnno laughed. 'This is more like it, proper family chit-chat!'

'Marie,' Beesely interrupted, fearing the start of a family row. 'Do you wish to stay with Otto ... if we can make your past history disappear?'

‘I’m not raising a child by myself!’ she angrily stated. Softer, she added, ‘And he’s a very good cook.’

‘Really?’ Johnno asked. ‘So how come you two have never invited me around for a good meal?’

Otto stated, ‘I would not have *you* in my home.’

Johnno focused on him. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘I have seen the mess in the dungeon!’

‘Dungeon?’ Marie muttered to herself.

‘That’s not *my* mess!’ Johnno protested. ‘That’s Thomas.’

‘Hah!’ Beesely let out.

Four voices start to speak at the same time, over-lapping.

2

Otto welcomed the French delegation into Beesely’s office, Marie off to sleep on a camp bed in a storeroom in the command centre, discreetly out of the way. Four men in dark blue suits walked in, introduced one at a time; the French Ambassador to Switzerland, his Military Attaché, plus two men in their forties that had names but, curiously, no job titles or descriptions. The group had just driven down from Bern.

Beesely sat and ordered French coffee, tea and an assortment of cakes and biscuits as the delegation all glanced in turn at the boy with a holstered pistol sleeping in a chair at the end of the room. Johnno wandered in with his MP5 slung, looking the new arrivals rudely up and own before sitting on the cabinet behind Beesely. Otto finally closed the door.

‘Gentlemen, welcome to Schloss Diane and K2,’ Beesely began. ‘I assume you can all speak English. If not, I will speak French.’

‘We all understand English,’ the Ambassador responded, a diplomatic smile and slight head tip.

‘Good, good. So, to business, gentlemen. May I enquire as to your reason for this –’ he checked his watch. ‘- very early meeting?’

‘First, Mister Beesely,’ the Ambassador began. ‘Perhaps an explanation from you. We came through ten roadblocks to get here, and half of Bern seems to be awake and on the move? And your facility here has many hundreds of soldiers seemingly on alert.’

‘Boris Luchenkov,’ Beesely carefully mouthed.

The visitors glanced at each other.

‘Luchenkov is in prison,’ the man named as Henri stated. He was a fit, tanned and robust looking man in his mid forties.

‘Not as of yesterday, he isn’t,’ Beesely informed them. ‘He escaped prison and has fled Russia – hell bent on revenge against us.’

The visitors again glanced at each other.

‘We did not know that,’ Henri admitted.

Beesely tipped his head. ‘Perhaps, gentlemen, if we had a better working relationship – then we would have informed you of it.’

‘You knew yesterday?’ the man introduced as Pascal enquired.

‘We are very well informed,’ Beesely pointed out, stretching the truth by a few hours.

‘This man, Luchenkov,’ their Ambassador began, ‘He has sent people to attack you, here, like before?’

‘Yes. But this time, hopefully, not with French assistance.’

The four men straightened, their ministries still reeling from the political fall-out.

‘We did not ... *assist* this man,’ Henri insisted.

‘You didn’t stop him,’ Beesely quickly countered.

‘Our undercover agents are, as you say, *deep cover* agents. They observe, without interfering,’ Henri explained.

‘It is also true,’ their Ambassador began, glancing at the other men, ‘that we, as a Government, were not so happy with Herr Gunter and K2 – in previous years.’

‘That, I can understand,’ Beesely conceded. ‘But, hopefully, now you realise that we are not the same organisation.’

‘Now you are a front for British and American Intelligence,’ Pascal suggested.

‘We are a front ... for ourselves,’ Beesely corrected him. ‘If our aims, and our projects, fall in line with those of Britain and America, then we co-operate with them. But we do not take orders from anyone. And, if there is some small project that *your* government desires assistance with then we shall be only too glad to assist.’

‘That is odd,’ Pascal sarcastically stated. ‘Since we are now clearing up the mess from a car-bomb at the DGSE headquarters in Paris –’

‘A bit slack,’ Johno commented.

Pascal squinted towards him. ‘You are the one called Johno?’

‘And thankfully,’ Beesely interrupted, ‘there is only one like him.’

Johno grinned at the visitors.

‘A bit slack?’ Pascal repeated, carefully pronouncing the words.

‘To let someone drive a car-bomb up to your headquarters,’ Johno explained. ‘Were your guards asleep?’

Pascal did not look happy, staring back at Johno.

‘This car,’ Henri explained, ‘had Swiss number plates. Registered in Zug ... to you.’

‘Clever move,’ Johno stated.

‘Quite,’ Beesely agreed, facing Otto. ‘Luchenkov probably knows we don’t get along with our French cousins.’

Pascal eased forwards. 'Given the other car bombs going off, perhaps someone here saw the opportunity to ... even a score.'

Otto eased forwards. 'How many people were killed?'

'None,' Pascal answered. 'Luckily.'

'Then the car bomb was not us,' Otto coldly suggested. 'If we wanted you dead, the whole building would have gone – with you in it. And on a busy Monday morning, not the middle of a Saturday night.'

The French stopped dead and blinked, their Ambassador aghast at Otto's comments.

'Sir,' came from the phone. 'Gun battle five miles north, heavy weapons used.'

'Thank you.'

'There is danger here?' their Ambassador asked, now concerned.

'You tell me?' Johno stated, standing and then resting against the cabinet. 'Any French mercenaries on their way? Any staging areas on the French border?'

Beesely hadn't taken his eyes off the French; he waited for a response from the guests. The Ambassador turned to his people. And also waited.

'We have no information of any such attack planned,' Henri insisted, his head half turned to the Ambassador and talking out of the side of his mouth.

'Missile launched! Incoming missile!' burst from the phone, an alarm sounding a second later.

Johno eased away from the cabinet, the blast causing him to wobble on his feet, the lights flickering on-and-off for a second before emergency lighting kicked in. A dull rumble reverberated around the room for many seconds, ceiling tiles falling down or hanging at odd angles, dust drifting down in grey, ghostly swirls in the reduced lighting. Then came a deathly silence, its effect enhanced by the dim light.

Johno quickly lifted the Ambassador up from where the man dropped down, everyone's attention now focused on the ceiling. They were, after all, underground.

'That was big,' Johno got out as he also studied the ceiling. He pressed a button on the desk phone. 'Where did the missile hit?'

Coughing could be heard, followed by a rasping voice. 'The cliff top, sir.'

The French all now stood, still watching the ceiling as if it may suddenly cave in.

Otto tried calling up images on the computer, finding none. 'Outside cameras are destroyed.' He selected a camera from the cliff-top and clicked REWIND. When he got something other than static he clicked through single frame images as Johno and Beesely closed in.

'There,' Johno stated. They studied the freeze frame. 'That's a cruise missile.'

'Cruise missile?' Beesely repeated, the French trying to get a look.

'That's an old Russian cruise missile,' Henri stated, a concerned glance at his colleagues.

'Sir!' burst from the phone.

'Yes?'

'Sir, the missile was fired from the back of a lorry. We killed the men at the lorry, seven of them, four guards wounded.'

'Well done.'

'My God!' Pascal stated. 'They fired that from the back of a lorry?'

'They were supposed to be air-launched,' Henri pointed out. 'They must have made a slide-ramp for it.'

'Beesely,' came a strained English voice, one of the ex-SAS, but not a voice Johno recognised.

'Yes?' Beesely answered, sitting back down.

‘The top of the castle has gone. Everyone in the restaurant is dead.’ Beesely slowly eased back up, his mouth opening. ‘Eight troopers were in there ... with Kev.’

Johno barged past the visitors and ran out the door. ‘Medics!’ he screamed as he ran along the walkway and towards the command centre’s heavy metal doors, guards following. At the second turn of the stairwell he met a trooper dragging an injured man. He stopped for just a second. ‘Get him to the great hall!’

He bound up the stairs through the darkness, two a time. Another corner and another man being dragged, the smoke and dust thickening with each turn of the stairwell. At the top of the stairs he could not proceed further, the floor covered in dead and dying men. He lifted the first man by his harness.

‘Drag them down!’ he shouted at the guards as they bumped into him, blinded by the smoke and lack of illumination. Six men were dragged past him, Johno now conscious of the sound of unseen flames and the heat of a fire. He could also feel blasts of damp night air; the roof had gone. He lifted his phone. ‘Fire fighters to the restaurant! Night sights and breathing apparatus!’

Straining to breath he had no choice but to retreat, feeling his way back down and stumbling over the debris. Stopping more guards on the way up he ordered them to wait for the fire fighters.

In the foyer he grabbed Mr. Freiserling. ‘Were any of your staff up there?’ he barked.

‘No, sir. With the alert they are down here,’ Mr. Freizerling informed him.

In the great hall medics were now assisting troopers, the wounded men laid-out on the huge wooden tables. The first three were seriously hurt by falling masonry and stones, one lay badly burnt on the face and hands, three more were sat upright and being tended for small cuts. Between two tables three feet stuck out from under a black plastic sheet.

‘Who are they?’ Johno asked, pointing.

‘Billy, Whisper and Masey,’ a trooper coughed out.

Johno took a big breath and lowered his head, closing his eyes for a moment. ‘All Kev’s team.’

‘Take a look outside,’ the same trooper enigmatically suggested.

Johno stiffened, suddenly concerned, turning and running through the courtyard as a dozen guards were dragged in. Outside of the drawbridge he grabbed a guard. ‘What happened to them?’ A long line of guards were now either limping, or being carried towards, the castle.

‘They were near the castle when the missile hit. Rocks went two hundred yards, raining down on everyone, smashing through walls and windows. I think we have fifty, sixty wounded – some dead.’

Johno lifted his phone. ‘This is Johno. Get the wounded to the tunnels, the castle is on fire. If we get another missile the castle will go, burying everyone!’

Two vehicles pulled up and eight instructors from the ‘funny farm’ jumped down.

‘Where do you need us?’ Big Dave bellowed.

‘Get inside, strip the kit off the dead and wounded and get back out here,’ Johno shouted. The ‘old crazies’ ran inside.

Johno breathed in the cool damp fog, not being able to see more than ten yards, the top of the castle obscured. He could just make out flickering flames distorted through the dense fog. Into his phone he ordered, ‘Send Alpha and Bravo squadrons to Zug to protect the families. Send Charlie squadron up the mountain and Delta to me. Send me all able bodied and remaining SAS troopers, front of the castle. Have doctors and nurses brought from Zug.’

‘Johno?’ came a distorted voice. ‘Cliff top.’

‘Cliff top, go ahead.’

‘Johno, we’re all down,’ the voice croaked.

‘Cliff top, make your way down the hill – we’ll send help when we can.’ He re-dialled. ‘Send reserve cliff-top troop up the cliff, the existing team is injured. And a medic or two if you can spare them.’

‘Yes, sir.’

He re-dialled. ‘Beesely?’

‘Yes, we’re here, we’ve been listening in.’

‘Four or more dead and sixty wounded. So far.’

Beesely paused. ‘Understood.’

‘I’m going to co-ordinate things from here. Oh, and Beesely – another hit like that and we’ll be in serious shit. If that missile had hit a castle window instead of the cliff face ... we’d have sixty dead.’

‘What can we do against that?’ Beesely asked.

‘Fog is too thick for our Apaches. So start praying. Out.’

‘Johno?’ came from his phone.

‘Yes?’

‘Aircraft approaching.’

‘In this weather?’ he loudly challenged. ‘Can you reach it on the radio?’ He peered up into the dark.

‘No response, sir. Our people on the other side of the lake say it sounds like a small Cessna.’

‘Cut all outside lights!’ Johno barked. ‘Surface to air missiles to the front of the castle and any spare fifty cal’s. The cliff top anti-aircraft is out of commission, not that they could hit a lot in this fucking weather!’

The lights went out, just illumination from car headlights remaining as the wounded were ferried in. But Johno could see an orange glow coming from the castle roof. He grabbed a guard.

‘Get those fucking fires put out! It’s like a beacon to any attacking aircraft, they’ll use it as a target!’

The ‘old crazies’ re-appeared, now with harnesses and weapons.

‘Where d’ya want us?’ Big Dave asked.

‘Right behind me,’ Johno told them, giving them a quick once over. Two guards rushed out with fifty calibre rifles, struggling to carry ammunition boxes. ‘Here!’ Johno said, pointing to two Range Rovers. ‘Set them up on the side of the vehicles so that you can fire upwards. We won’t see the aircraft till it’s right on us.’

Two Range Rovers pulled up and unloaded their wounded. They were about to drive away when Johno flagged them down. ‘Drive this car to the grass near the West Gate and set fire to it.’

‘What? Are you crazy?’ the driver protested.

‘We need a decoy for the aircraft coming in. Something for them to bomb!’

The driver considered it for a moment, finally driving off. The second vehicle inched forwards, the driver’s window down. He had heard the previous exchange.

‘What about me?’ the driver asked.

Johno pointed towards the park that slopped down towards the lake. ‘Bottom of the park, set fire to it.’

The vehicle turned onto the grass and headed down through the park, navigating around the benches.

Johno lifted his phone. ‘Tell the pill boxes we’re setting fire to a vehicle at the bottom of the park. In fact, tell the pill-box guards to exit with their fifty cal’s and machine guns and set-up ready to fire at an aircraft.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Will that fool an aircraft?’ Big Dave asked, peering up into the fog.

‘Fuck knows,’ Johno replied. ‘But that fire on the castle is probably visible for three hundred yards. If they’ve got night sights, visible for ten fucking miles!’

Big Dave made eye contact. ‘If they’re flying in this weather they’ve something other than ‘dead reckoning’. They must have fucking shit-hot GPS ... or night sights.’

Johnno sighed. 'For that cruise missile to hit so accurately it must have had a modern GPS guidance system hard-wired to it.'

'Altitude was wrong,' Big Dave pointed out. 'They hit two hundred feet too high.'

'Then let's hope this fucking plane hits the same spot.'

'Suicide pilot?' Big Dave asked.

'No. Unmanned, I reckon.'

Big Dave gave Johnno a look. 'With fifty cal's and night sights you'll be lucky to hit it at four hundred yards.' Johnno agreed with a nod as he lit up. 'Which means its momentum will make it smack down right here.' Dave pointed at the floor between them.

'Fucking optimist,' Johnno sighed.

'Surface-to-air missiles!' a guard shouted as six men carried three heavy plastic cases out of the castle.

'Set-up in the park,' Johnno shouted. 'Just over there.' The guards hobbled as best they could with the awkward boxes.

'Will they lock-on in this weather?' Big Dave asked, watching them go.

'Front of a Cessna is the warmest part,' Johnno suggested. He took a drag. 'Fingers crossed.'

'Johnno?' called Simon, the senior guard.

Johnno spun around. 'Simon? When did you get here?'

'While ago. Number One Company is formed and kitted.'

'Excellent. Get them in the tunnels till they're needed. Another missile strike and we'll lose a lot of people if they're all bunched-up out here.' Simon nodded and headed back inside. 'Oh, Simon,' Johnno called. 'Is that East tunnel finished?'

'Not fully, but we can use it.'

Johnno gave Simon a 'thumbs up' gesture.

'How many people you got?' Big Dave asked.

‘Here? Front line guards? Three hundred. Sixty of which are already down. Our best two squadrons are in the town.’

‘Is that ... wise?’ Big Dave challenged.

‘I’d rather lose people here than families in the town. If the town gets hit the moral of this lot goes out the window and they all go home looking for loved ones in the rubble.’

‘Good point,’ Big Dave conceded.

‘Aircraft approaching!’ someone shouted.

‘Get ready!’ Johno shouted to the men around the front of the castle. Guards took up station behind the line of Range Rovers, weapons trained on the unseen approaching aircraft.

Johno lifted his phone. ‘All stations. Incoming!’ He jogged to the middle of the tarmac. ‘Missiles? You ready?’

‘Yes,’ came back, the men unseen. ‘We have a lock.’

‘Fire one missile!’ Johno shouted.

Two seconds later a bright flash and loud ‘whoosh’ signalled the launch. Then silence, everyone straining to hear. A dull bang registered with the men, echoing off the hills several times.

‘Did we get it?’ Big Dave shouted.

Johno turned and shrugged, becoming conscious of a whistling sound followed by a splash.

‘It’s in the lake,’ a voice shouted out of the darkness, coming from the direction of a pillbox. A cheer went up. Followed a second later by two thousand pounds of High Explosive detonating.

A wall of white mist hit Johno, knocking him off his feet, along with many of the other men. The Range Rovers wobbled, bending with the blast and then bouncing back, windows blowing in at the office block fifty yards to the west.

Stunned and temporarily deafened, Johno struggled to ease up, suddenly drenched by a wall of water hitting him and knocking him back down. On his stomach now he tried to look towards the line of vehicles as sheet after sheet of

water rained down. Then a small branch hit him on the head as a torrent of mud descended. Fighting to breath air, and not water, he struggled to his knees and started forwards, crawling between two cars and stopping when his path became blocked by Big Dave.

‘Shit!’ Big Dave let out, their faces almost touching.

Something heavy hit the bonnet of the nearest vehicle. Then they both looked down at a large fish, its tail thrashing, its mouth opening and closing as it gaped.

Dave helped Johnno to his feet, the two men soaking wet and covered in mud. ‘Check for wounded,’ Big Dave shouted towards the nearest men as Johnno wobbled, unsteady on his feet.

‘Pill ... box ... men,’ Johnno managed to get out, coughing out mud.

Big Dave ordered the men forwards, a guard taking Johnno inside.

3

‘Dear god!’ the Ambassador slowly let out as two guards ‘dropped’ Johnno into a chair.

Beesely pointed at a guard. ‘Go down to the dungeon and bring some fresh clothes for Johnno.’

Pascal turned to Henri, a slight frown. ‘Dungeon?’

Otto assisted Johnno remove his clothes; his jacket, his shoulder holster placed on the desk, his shoes and trousers and then his shirt – all going straight into a large plastic bag.

Beesely could not be sure what shook the French the most, Johnno’s scars or the smell of the lake mud. He pressed a button. ‘Vodka Red Bull for Johnno. A double!’

Their Ambassador glanced at the phone then raised his head. ‘We should make contact with our government and the embassy; let them know we are alright.’

‘Your mobile phones will work just fine down here,’ Beesely pointed out. ‘There are boosters. But I am afraid it is not safe for you to leave just yet.’

Stood just in his Simpson’s shorts Johno grabbed a lukewarm coffee and downed it in one, observed wide-eyed by the French, before slouching down into his seat as Otto offered tissues and a towel. Sat semi-naked, Johno wiped his face, hair and moustache. With Pascal and Henri using their mobiles at the opposite end of the room to the sleeping Thomas, Johno slowly recovered.

‘You OK?’ Beesely finally asked.

Johno held his nose and blew, clearing his ears. ‘Better. Ears still a bit funny. Good job that ordnance went off in the lake, or I’d be dead.’

Otto had been disposing of Johno’s clothes, but now swung his head around to face Johno as the French Ambassador used tissue to clean a cut on Johno’s head.

Johno continued, ‘If it had hit the park we would have lost thirty ... fifty people.’

The Ambassador stopped dead and glanced at Beesely.

‘We were lucky,’ Beesely commented. ‘Using that fog to attack us was a good idea of theirs.’

Johno raised a finger. ‘Which gives me an idea.’ He faced Otto. ‘Get the weather reports for the past few days and the forecast for the next week.’

With a curious frown, Otto stepped out.

‘Something?’ Beesely asked Johno.

‘Been thinking about those car bombs, being placed at 3am on a fucking Sunday morning. If I didn’t know better I’d say they were done now, at this time, for minimum casualties.’

‘Or,’ Beesely considered, ‘they were launched to coincide with the attack on us, here, weather permitting.’

‘Weather permitting?’ the Ambassador repeated.

His Military Attaché closed in. ‘This weather will suit certain types of terrorist action – like assembling a launcher

and missile. Doing it at night and in the fog helps them not to be detected. And if the missile is pre-programmed they need not worry where they are when they launch.'

'Precisely,' Beesely agreed. 'We might have shot down that Cessna with our Apaches had it been a clear night. And had a better chance with the weapons we have here.'

'Good weather favours the defenders,' the Attaché suggested, 'not the attackers.'

'So they waited,' Johnno commented, still cleaning his face. He suddenly sat upright. 'Last night, when I was driving back from the town, the fog – it came down around 8pm!'

'That's right,' Beesely agreed. 'So why wait till 3am?'

'Fewer people on the streets?' the Ambassador ventured.

'Don't make sense,' Johnno commented, staring out of focus.

'Why?' the Ambassador challenged. 'Less chance of being seen by the police.'

'And less chance of hurting anyone,' Johnno countered. 'What the fuck is the point of setting off a car-bomb, if all you do is make a loud noise?' he stood as a guard handed him clothes, starting to dress.

'It's a puzzler,' Beesely commented.

Pascal and Henri re-joined the group.

'Your forces on alert?' Beesely enquired, glancing at the men from under his eyebrows.

'We have ... taken steps,' Pascal admitted.

Johnno faced him. 'Hey, dick head,' he quietly called, stepping closer to the man. 'We didn't send that car bomb to Paris, and we don't do stuff like that. Verstehe?'

Pascal simply tipped his head and sat as Johnno finished dressing.

'Sir?' came from the phone.

'Yes?'

'Dame Helen, sir.'

'Put her through.'

‘Beesely?’ came the dry voice of Dame Helen.
‘Yes, my dear. Are you in your office?’
‘Just got in. We found another car bomb in London.’
‘Got some news for you,’ Beesely sombrely stated.
‘What’s happened?’ she asked, now concerned.
‘We got hit by a cruise missile ... and a plane packed with explosives.’
‘My God, any wounded?’
Beesely rubbed his forehead. ‘About a dozen dead and a hundred wounded.’
‘Dear ... God.’
‘The top of the castle is gone, and on fire.’
‘Are you OK? And John?’
‘John got blown up, but he’s OK, he’s here.’
‘Watcha babes?’ John shouted.
‘Hello Helen,’ Otto added, leaning towards the desk phone.
‘What comes next, Beesely?’ she asked. ‘We’re making plans to close central London.’
‘We have some French visitors, Helen; their Ambassador and some DGSE gentlemen.’
‘Good luck with those morons.’
Beesely closed his eyes for a moment, rubbing his forehead. ‘Helen, when I say with us, I mean ... in the room.’
‘Oh. Apologies Ambassador.’
‘And this is?’ the Ambassador enquired.
‘Dame Helen Eddington-Small, director of MI6, London,’ Beesely informed the peeved-looking French.
‘Thanks Beesely,’ Helen sarcastically offered. ‘You could have told them I was your aunt.’
‘An aunt ... interested in London car bombs, at 4am?’ Beesely toyed.
‘Any more intel?’ she asked.
‘I’ll call when there is. TTFN.’ He hung up.

‘You have a close working relationship with the current director of MI6,’ the Ambassador observed.

‘She assisted us greatly in dealing with a rogue element of the CIA.’

‘So we have been piecing together,’ Pascal indicated.

Beesely focused on the man, offering a stern look. ‘If there are any ... *pieces* missing, just ask me,’ he stated, an edge to his voice. ‘You’ll find us ... quite co-operative.’

The French glanced at each other as ‘Sir!’ burst from the phone.

Beesely sighed and pressed a button. ‘Yes?’

‘Car bombs have gone off in England, sir.’

‘Gone off?’ he queried. ‘Or been found?’

‘These have exploded, sir.’ The French eased closer to the desk. ‘The two bridges over a river called The Severn –’ Johnno snapped his head around, a horrified look. ‘- and the bridges are damaged and closed. Also a train tunnel under one of the bridges and another bridge on a road called the M50.’

Johnno met Beesely’s astonished look, closing in. ‘Both bridges, the train tunnel and the M50? They’ve cut Wales off from England!’

‘And the economic fall out will be in the billions,’ Beesely stated, barely above a whisper as he stared out of focus.

‘They knew exactly where to hit,’ Johnno cursed, kicking over his chair and frightening the French.

‘I know these bridges,’ Otto suggested, a stunned look. ‘We flew over them when we went to the funeral. They are... massive. They will take years to rebuild!’

Beesely pressed a button. ‘I want accurate damage assessments made of those bridges. And fly twenty of our administrators and facilitators to England, along with protection. Straight away.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Beesely eased back and rubbed his face.

‘I am sorry,’ the Ambassador offered. ‘I know these bridges as well, and the chaos they will cause on Monday morning. It will be like ... closing all the bridges across the Seine at the same time. Devastating.’

Now fully dressed, Johno lifted his MP5 and slung it. ‘I’ll be outside.’

The great hall came as a shock. Johno stepped slowly through, listening to the groans of guards and troopers being attended by dozens of medics. He followed a stretcher out to the road and stood observing as the wounded guard was loaded into an ambulance.

‘You OK?’ a wet and muddy Big Dave asked.

Simon walked past, stopped and looked Johno over before walking quickly back inside.

‘I’ll live,’ Johno quietly let out, accepting a cigarette from a trooper. ‘Any intruders spotted?’

‘No,’ the trooper responded. ‘Search teams five miles out. So far ... nothing. But in this weather they wouldn’t find them unless they stood on them.’

Johno took a drag, nodding to himself.

‘The pill box guys are sore and stunned, but OK,’ Big Dave reported, his face still muddied. ‘The guy who set fire to his car down there isn’t so good, but he’ll live. His fire was fucking short lived. Still, the blast put the fires on the roof out.’

Johno glanced up at the castle. The fog had cleared a little, no sign of anything burning.

‘Johno!’ burst from his phone.

He lifted it. ‘Yeah?’

‘Aircraft approaching.’

Johno lowered his phone. ‘Incoming! Aircraft approaching!’ Men started to run. He grabbed a guard. ‘Clear those ambulances out of here, then no more till I say. Get everyone deep inside.’ He faced Big Dave. ‘What happened to the fifty cal?’

‘Being cleaned over there! Covered in fucking mud!’

They ran across the tarmac to two guards and a trooper sat cleaning two fifty cal’s.

‘Get them assembled and ready!’ Johno shouted. ‘What about the second missile?’

‘Knackered,’ a trooper reported.

Johno led Dave by the arm, back to the drawbridge. He lifted his phone. ‘Cliff-top! Report status!’

‘Cliff-top here. We have two fifty cal’s and three surface-to-air missiles, plus two heavy machineguns.’

‘Get ready, aircraft approaching! As soon as you get a lock, you fire. Out.’ He ran into the courtyard. ‘Incoming! Get inside!’

The wounded, now in the process of being stretchered out, got turned around, their ambulances departing without them. Back outside Johno counted four troopers and ten guards, an assortment of weapons pointed skywards, plus Big Dave’s group of eight ‘old crazies’.

‘Second time lucky?’ Dave asked as Johno tucked in behind a Range Rover.

‘Isn’t it third time lucky, second time unlucky?’ Johno queried, straining to see and hear the approaching aircraft through the gloom.

‘We’ll soon find out.’

‘Johno?’ came from his phone.

He lifted it. ‘Yeah?’

‘A lorry has crashed through a road-block, five miles west, heading towards us.’

‘Why didn’t they shoot out the tyres?’ he barked.

‘They did, but it had no effect.’

‘Battle wagon!’ Big Dave suggested.

‘Increase our strength on that road,’ Johno ordered. ‘Issue anti-tank weapons to a mobile unit and get out there.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘What ya got?’ Dave asked. ‘66mm?’

‘Loads of them up on the cliff,’ Johno pointedly remarked.

‘Great. All we need to do is divert the fucking lorry up the cliff.’

Johno lifted his phone. ‘Get me Simon?’

‘Yes?’ came a voice from behind.

They turned to find Simon stood a few feet away, hands on hips.

Johno stepped closer. ‘Get your men to the west tunnel, issue some 66mm.’ He slapped him on the arm. ‘Go!’

Simon turned on a heel and ran inside.

‘So what’s that lorry going to do?’ Dave asked. ‘Ram the West Gate?’

‘There’re ramps,’ Johno informed him, returning to scanning the fog. ‘Won’t get through. Ditches on either side.’

They could now hear the distant drone of an aircraft.

Johno lifted his phone. ‘Cliff top, do you have lock on?’

‘No yet.’

They waited as the sound grew.

‘It’s the water,’ Dave whispered.

‘What?’ Johno asked, now whispering himself.

‘The sound,’ Dave whispered. ‘Carries across the lake, more than on land.’

Johno took a big breath and straightened. ‘Ah, what the fuck.’ He lifted his phone. ‘All outside units, continuous independent fire – into the air over the lake.’

Orange tracer rounds leapt into the blackness, disappearing after a hundred yards. Thousands of rounds burst forwards into the night sky, loud bangs from the fifty calibres hardly registering in the din created. For thirty seconds the firing continued, a deafening crescendo echoing around the hills. Then a bang registered, a flash above the lake.

‘Cease fire!’ Johno shouted, a second time into the phone.

An aircraft out of control could be heard, its engine screeching in protest.

‘There!’ Johnno shouted, a faint light spiralling ... directly towards the West Gate. Desperately, he shouted into the phone, ‘West Gate, take cover – take cover!’ He watched it spiral for two seconds. ‘Get down!’

Everyone at the front of the castle dropped down, just in time, the blast washing over them a second later. Still stunned by the blast, men scrambled to their feet, peering towards the West Gate. Lights could be seen through the fog, flickering flames strong enough to penetrate three hundred yards of mist and fog.

Johnno called into his phone, ‘West Gate, report.’ Silence. ‘West Gate, report,’ he desperately repeated.

Again nothing came back, the men glancing at each other.

‘Anyone on the west side, report.’ Nothing. Johnno turned and quietly ordered, ‘Ten men, five vehicles. See if there is anyone still alive down there.’ The vehicles set-off along the west track. ‘Simon?’

‘Simon here.’

‘Take ten men out of the west tunnel, see if there are any wounded at the West Cottage.’

‘OK. Out.’

‘Beesely, you there?’

‘We heard.’

‘We’ve lost the whole of the West Perimeter, and that lorry is approaching.’

‘Can you stop it?’

‘Simon’s men are in the west tunnel, they should have 66mm by now. They’ll stop the lorry.’

‘Casualties on the West Gate?’ Beesely asked.

Johnno rubbed his face with his sleeve. ‘Could be thirty dead, give or take.’ He hung up, slumping against the wheel of the remaining vehicle and lighting up, joined by Dave and a trooper as others rushed past.

Dave studied the side of Johnno's head. Quietly, he suggested, 'Another plane or missile ... and we're fucked. And I've only been in the job a week.'

'We're fucked now,' Johnno let out, barely above a whisper. 'This many casualties will be hard to get back from. Not to mention the press and the Swiss Government.' He took a drag. 'Did you hear about the UK?'

'No. What?'

'They blew up both the bridges over the river Severn, and the train tunnel and the M50.'

'Jesus,' Dave slowly let out. 'Be fucking chaos Monday morning, and for the year it'll take to repair them.'

'Severn Tunnel can't be repaired,' Johnno muttered. 'Too old. If it floods at all, it's gone.'

'Shit. Number of times I used that train tunnel, and those bridges. I can remember them being built.'

'You were a Bristol boy, yeah?' Johnno asked, whispering.

'Yep.'

They smoked their cigarettes as dark figures ran back and forth.

'Johnno?' crackled Beesely's voice.

Johnno lifted his phone with a tired arm. 'Yeah?'

'That lorry is still approaching, only a mile away.'

'OK.' He eased awkwardly up and looked down towards the West Gate. Into his phone he called, 'Anyone at the West Gate, report.'

'This is Mavo. There's no one here alive. Gate is gone, ramps down.'

'Withdraw back to the castle, on the double.' Johnno redialled. 'All stations, there is a lorry approaching the West Gate. It will probably explode when it gets there, an explosion bigger than anything seen so far tonight. Everyone get inside and get ready.'

He redialled. 'Operations, what happened to our mobile unit with 66mm?'

‘We can’t raise them.’

‘OK.’ Johno lowered the phone and turned to Big Dave. ‘They may’ve been ambushed outside the West Gate.’

‘Which means foot soldiers somewhere nearby,’ Big Dave pointed out.

‘Third time lucky?’ Johno asked, gesturing men inside to the courtyard. He raised his phone. ‘Cliff top, you’re our only chance to stop that lorry at the gate. If you get a chance then fire at it.’

‘Johno, this is cliff top. We can see the fires with our night sights. If we see the truck we’ll use the fifty calibres.’

The remaining men walked inside, Johno being the last one in after a final glance around the muddy tarmac.

A guard stepped up to him. ‘We have stopped four car bombs in Zug, no casualties amongst our people.’

Johno took a big breath. ‘That’s good news.’

‘Sir, should we not bring back the squadrons?’

Johno put a hand on the young guards’ shoulder and led him inside. ‘They wouldn’t do any good against aircraft. Better used in the town to protect the families.’ In the great hall, now cramped, they stopped – the noise level making conversation difficult. ‘Quiet down!’ Johno shouted, his words repeated by a few senior men around the cavernous room. Lifting his phone he asked, ‘Report?’

‘Lorry reported close now, sir, perhaps a hundred yards.’

‘OK.’ He lowered the phone. ‘All able bodied men form into your squads and be ready to move out after the explosion.’

Groups started to assemble around their team leaders.

‘Johno?’ crackled from his phone.

‘Yeah?’

‘This is Condor One, I’m over the lake at five hundred feet.’

‘Can you see a lorry approaching the West Gate on your thermal cameras?’ Johno desperately asked.

‘Yes, got it.’

‘Then destroy it, for fucks sake!’

‘Stand by.’

‘What is it?’ Big Dave asked, all eyes now on Johnno.

‘Apaches are here!’ Johnno shouted.

A deafening cheer went up, echoing and resonating around the great hall. Johnno put a finger in his ear as he listened to his phone.

‘Good hit on the lorry ... standby ... that looks like people jumping out the back.’

‘How many?’

‘Hard to tell at this distance. Perhaps twenty or thirty.’

‘Strafe them!’

‘Moving in closer. Standby.’

With his phone still to his ear Johnno lifted an arm and made a circular motion, then pointed towards the doors. Squads ran outside, Johnno walking beside them. On the tarmac he spread out the men and told them to get down as he waited, the sound of the hovering Apache resonating loudly through the fog.

‘This is Condor One, we are showing a mechanical fault and returning to base, over.’

‘Condor One, report on the ground forces!’

‘This is Condor One. We fired on movement around the lorry, but I believe there are twenty individuals down there, more on the lake side.’

‘Where on the lake side?’

‘Hundred yards from the fires, towards the east, over and out.’

Johnno lowered his phone. ‘Shit.’

‘Johnno! Potential intruders, east side, on the hill,’ burst from his phone.

‘OK,’ Johnno responded. ‘Operations. Are any sensors working? Any cameras?’

‘No, sir. Nothing,’ came back.

‘What is it?’ Big Dave asked.

‘Ground attack,’ Johnno said without taking his gaze of the flickering fires coming from the West Gate. He raised his phone. ‘All stations – fix bayonets!’

It was the codeword for a ground assault. But not only a ground assault, it was the codeword to be used if the camp was about to be overrun.

Fix bayonets!

1

Beesely opened his desk draw and took out a pistol, carefully observed by the French. He checked the magazine and loaded it as Otto retrieved an MP5, cocking it.

‘What has happened?’ Pascal asked.

‘We just got the codeword from Johnno,’ Beesely explained. ‘We’ll soon have some unwelcome visitors.’

‘This facility will be attacked – like before?’ the Ambassador gasped, standing up slowly.

Beesely faced Otto, ignoring the Ambassador. ‘Give Pascal, Henri and the Military Attaché weapons.’

Otto opened a cabinet and retrieved three MP5s, handing them out.

Beesely stood. ‘You gentlemen have the right to defend yourselves, should attackers penetrate this facility. I seriously doubt that they will simply stop and ask you for your identities.’

Pascal and Henri checked and cocked their weapons with an experienced proficiency, the Attaché a little slow and uncertain.

The Ambassador reached across and took the ‘double-Vodka Red bull’ that had arrived for Johnno. He sat looking deflated. ‘Cheers.’

‘Look on the bright side, Ambassador. Since I took over here we have more than trebled our offensive and defensive capabilities. Put your faith into Swiss resolve, and a few dozen ex-SAS troopers.’

* * *

Johnno redialled. ‘Simon, deploy – but do not cross the grass on the west side.’

‘Understood,’ came back.

‘Cliff top, aim all weapons at the trees between the lake and the west road, from the cottages to the West Gate. Wait my signal.’

‘Understood.’

Johno lowered his phone and turned around as fifty heavily armed guards jogged up from the East camp. ‘Which unit are you?’

Their leader approached. ‘Reserve unit East-Two, Herr Johno.’

‘Good. Get to the office block, form a line facing the lake. On the double, but do it quietly – no shouting.’

The unit filed past, onto the grass and the short distance to the office block.

‘All squads!’ Johno called. The men stood up and made ready. Johno held out his arm. ‘Form a line.’ The men formed up, stretching towards the pillboxes and away from the castle. Johno glanced over the assortment of weapons. ‘All 9mm weapons, two steps backwards.’ A dozen men stepped back. ‘You watch our rear, turn and crouch.’ He lifted his phone. ‘Simon, report.’

‘Simon here. We are spread out, from the bunker entrance to the graves.’

‘Advance ten yards and stop.’ Johno waved *his* line forwards ten yards and stopped. He listened through the fog then dialled. ‘Lakeside cottages, report,’ he whispered.

‘Johno, we have intruders. We can see them in our night sights.’

‘Where?’

‘In the tree line, between the west road and the lake. Twenty yards from the west pill box.’ Johno’s men were just ten yards behind that pillbox.

‘Lakeside cottages, when we open fire, move out along the lake and cut them off. Out. West pillbox, ready?’ Johno whispered.

‘Ready.’

‘East pillbox, do not fire, we’re in the way. Simon, and all units, when you here the first 66mm – open fire at the trees. Cliff top, hit the trees with a 66mm when you’re ready.’

They waited, all eerily quiet in the fog. The first bang from the discharge of the 66mm on the cliff arrived at the same time as the sound, and mild blast, of the projectile hitting the trees. Then a thousand rounds a second cut through the fog, orange, red and green tracers disappearing into the blackness.

Johno could feel, rather than hear, the crack of a round pass over his head – someone shooting outwards. After twenty seconds he shouted, ‘Cease fire!’ then again into the phone. It took a good ten seconds for all the shooting to stop. ‘Lakeside, report.’

As they waited another burst of muffled fire could be heard through the dark, coming from the lakeshore.

‘Lakeside unit here. No movement. Twenty, maybe thirty dead intruders.’

‘Double-tap every body, don’t take any chances. Simon, advance west and secure the West Gate. Reserve Unit, move back to the east of the castle. Operations, get the ambulances back – regardless of intruders.’

He took a big breath. ‘All guards and all units deploy to the grounds and sweep for intruders in groups of four – check your fire. All outside lights on, and vehicle headlights, fog is lifting quickly.’ He lowered the phone. ‘Back to the castle, get the wounded out!’

Big Dave walked alongside him. ‘Third time lucky?’

Johno sighed. ‘Maybe.’

‘Do you think that’s it?’

‘It’s enough.’ Johno glanced up as he walked. ‘Fog is shifting. Dawn should see the Apaches here.’

‘I heard that one crashed trying to get here.’

‘Pilots get out?’

‘So they said.’

‘Good. Small victories.’

2

‘You OK?’ Beesely asked, standing as Johno entered.

‘I’ll live,’ Johno reported as he sorted through half-drunk teas and coffees. He bit into a doughnut and washed it down with lukewarm tea before facing the French, now sat in a row – three armed. ‘You still here?’

The Ambassador responded, ‘Happier to be in here and not out there this tonight.’

Johno faced Beesely. ‘Blaum handling things?’

‘On his way down here,’ Beesely reported. ‘The Swiss police found and made-safe five car bombs.’

‘If they made-safe these car-bombs ... then they were half-arsed bombs,’ Johno snorted.

‘When I say the Swiss Police ...’ Beesely began.

‘Ah, our bomb disposal boys,’ Johno correctly guessed. ‘Still, bombs are made to go off, with bobby-traps as backups.’

‘None found,’ Otto reported.

‘A bit slack,’ Johno commented.

‘Or they were put together in a hurry,’ Pascal commented.

Johno glanced at him then shrugged. ‘Yours went off. So why not these?’

‘Thirty minute timers,’ Otto informed him. ‘Manual timers.’

‘Manual timers?’ Johno repeated, curling a lip.

‘Simple, but effective,’ Beesely suggested.

‘Maybe,’ Johno agreed, forcing down another doughnut.

Thomas stirred, walking over and rubbing his eyes – curiously observed by the French. ‘What time is it?’ he loudly complained.

‘Hey!’ Johno shouted. ‘Wake the fuck up, you little shit bag.’

‘What?’ Thomas protested.

‘You slept through an attack,’ Johno scolded.

‘I did?’

‘We got fifty killed, two hundred wounded. Go make yourself useful for a change.’ He thumbed towards the door.

Stunned, and glancing from face to face, Thomas walked out of the office.

‘Who’s ... child is he?’ the Ambassador delicately asked.

‘Mine,’ Johno reported.

‘And he stays ... here? Even when there is ... danger?’ the Ambassador delicately enquired.

‘We made a pact,’ Johno explained, checking the temperature of various cups, ‘when we were trapped in an underground Nazi complex together. One in danger, both in danger.’

The French glanced at each other.

‘I wouldn’t try to understand,’ Beesely suggested.

‘Sir?’ came from the phone. ‘Oliver Stanton.’

‘Put him through, please.’

‘Beesely, seen the news about Britain?’ came Mr. Stanton’s authoritative voice. The interest of the French was piqued by the American accent and they collectively inched closer.

‘Yes, unfortunately.’

‘How’s it your end?’

Beesely rubbed his forehead. ‘Estimated fifty dead, hundreds wounded.’

‘Jesus. What the hell happened?’ Stanton asked.

‘Got hit by a cruise missile, plus two light aircraft packed with explosives, then a ground assault.’

‘Who the hell would be daft enough to attack you?’

‘Don’t know the details yet, we’ll get that off the bodies.’

‘Has the attack finished?’

‘Unknown at the moment. We’re sat here waiting, four French guests, including their Ambassador.’

‘You took the French Ambassador prisoner?’

Beesely closed his eyes, sighing. ‘No, Oliver, they are sat opposite me, guests that got trapped when the attack began.’

‘Oh, right.’ Stanton offered a greeting in French. No response was forthcoming. ‘Did you give them back their paintings? Is that what their visit is about?’

‘No, but glad you reminded me. Talk soon.’

‘Listen, we’ve got people swearing they’ve seen Luchenkov all over the Middle East.’

‘So, he’s not there then,’ Beesely commented, making eye contact with Johnno.

‘Be there somewhere,’ Johnno loudly suggested, towards the phone.

‘I’ll call you back.’ Beesely ended the call and made eye contact with Otto. ‘Paintings.’ Otto stepped out.

‘Paintings?’ Henry repeated.

‘A sign of good will that we were holding for a ... better occasion.’ He jabbed a finger at the phone. ‘Fresh tea and coffee, doughnuts for Johnno.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Any further intruders reported?’

‘None, sir.’

‘Thank you.’ He hit a button and raised his head. ‘We may have been lucky. I guess they were planning on us being knocked out by the air assault, little resistance for the ground attack.’ He shrugged. ‘Be dawn soon, and the fog is lifting, so little chance of an effective ground assault.’

‘And you think this attack was organised by Luchenkov?’ the Ambassador asked.

‘Would seem that way,’ Beesely said without looking up. He jabbed a button. ‘Seven English breakfasts, please.’ He faced the French. ‘If you wouldn’t mind, gentlemen, let’s lose the hardware for breakfast, shall we?’

Otto collected the weapons. A minute later the first of the shrouded paintings was brought in and rested against a cabinet, keenly observed by the French – who now stood and observed. Thirty-six pictures later the French were confused.

‘What are these?’ Pascal asked. He lifted the shroud off the first painting then snapped upright. ‘My God!’ He quickly lifted the second and third shrouds as the others closed in.

Beesely pointed. ‘Those, gentlemen, were stolen by the Nazis during the last war. They had been stored by a certain Swiss bank, but we liberated them.’

‘They are priceless!’ Pascal gasped, lifting more shrouds.

‘They ... are yours, to take with you when you leave.’

The French stopped dead and faced Beesely for a few seconds before glancing at each other.

‘You are *giving* them to us?’ the Ambassador gasped. ‘They could be worth two hundred and fifty million dollars!’

‘Did we not say,’ Johno began. ‘Breakfast is twenty million Euros each.’

The French began smiling as they lifted more shrouds.

Beesely pressed a phone button. ‘Arrange for an armoured car to take the French paintings to Zurich Airport and then a secure flight for them to Paris. Thank you.’

A manager walked in and handed Otto a sheet of paper before retreating.

‘Damage assessment, British car bombs,’ Otto read. ‘One side of the older bridge is closed, small hole in the tarmac. Again one side of the second bridge closed, a large hole. Train tunnel was partially flooded before the back-up pumps were started. Seems the electrical controls to the water pumps were targeted, not the pumps themselves. M50 bridge has a hole in one carriageway.’

Beesely pressed a button. 'I want to know who is the usual contractor for repairs for the Severn Bridge in the UK, then get me the managing director at home.'

'Yes, sir.'

Fresh tea and coffee was brought in, the old cups cleared away.

Johno swallowed the last doughnut and stood. 'I'd better get back to it. See if we can't find Kev's body.'

Otto made eye contact, looking tired and concerned. 'I believe I heard mention that Kev – his body – is in the great hall.'

Dejected, Johno nodded as he turned and left.

In the great hall Johno moved through the chaos, noting a long line of body bags down the east wall. He grabbed a guard manager. 'Move all the bodies to the tunnels, we may need to fight in here and use this area for staging.'

The manager called over a dozen guards and started shifting the bodies.

Johno found Mavo and his group taking a break, slumped against a wall, steaming teas in their hands. 'You lot OK?'

'No injuries in my squad,' Mavo quietly reported. 'Few cuts and burns from searching the West Gate – that's all.'

'Is Kev's body down here?' Johno asked.

'I ain't dead yet, ya fucker!' came a weak voice.

Mavo's squad summoned enough strength to smile as Johno turned and faced a man being treated, his face and hands covered in bandages. 'Kev?'

'Aye, fuck face.'

'You're not dead?'

'Tell him the story,' Mavo encouraged, his voice going.

'What story?' Johno asked, grabbing Kev's hand before realising and letting go, Kev giving a short scream. 'Sorry.'

'I went to the bog,' Kev explained. 'Was having a wee bit a trouble passing a big log. Dropped my phone and got to

my knees to get it from the back of the bog – then the lights went out. Was there for half an hour, so they say.’

‘Do you know who’s gone from your squad?’ Johnno asked.

Mavo and his squad lowered their heads, noticed by Johnno.

‘Aye, lad. All gone, I’m the last one.’

Johnno put a hand on Kev’s chest. ‘Get yourself sorted, we’ll sort the families.’

‘Nay, lad. That’s my job, ya’s all hold off for a week or so.’

‘We are ready to move him,’ a doctor said, nudging Johnno firmly out of the way as a stretcher was brought alongside the table. Johnno assisted the medics, walking Kev outside and into a grey, misty dawn.

‘Sun’s up,’ Kev noted. ‘Survived another night.’

Johnno lit up, watching the ambulance go, then turned to find a line of injured guards and troopers sat against the wall, a trooper throwing a small fish at him. He stepped closer, noticing now the castle walls.

‘Going to need a good wash down,’ a trooper suggested. ‘Mud from the lake all over everything – even down the East Gate.’

Johnno slowly nodded as he inspected the grey walls.

‘Johnno?’

Johnno turned and stepped towards the guard calling his name. As he drew level the man pointed through the grey half-light at a convoy of Range Rovers pulling up.

‘Your visitors,’ the guard said.

‘Visitors?’ Johnno repeated.

Bilbo jumped down, followed by his three associates; they had travelled direct from Bulgaria by K2 helicopter, Johnno remembered. Stocky, five foot eleven and bald, Bilbo stood looking up at the castle’s roof, the mud on the walls, then down at the injured men. Two stretchers came out as he

stood and observed, the wounded loaded into ambulances. 'Jesus, Johnno.'

Johnno stepped closer and they clasped hands. 'Welcome to Schloss Diane, a picturesque castle in ornate grounds – with a wonderful view over the tranquil lake.'

An Apache flew overhead, not visible through the lingering mist.

'They briefed us on some of what happened here, and we heard the radio chatter ... but fuck!'

'*Fucked* ... we are. Fifty odd dead, two hundred wounded, castle wrecked, West Gate destroyed. I'd offer you the tour, but the lake exploded and we have fish in the trees.'

Bilbo glanced around, stunned. 'And all this is down to the arsehole who tried to hire us?'

'Yep. Thanks for that, by the way, you'll be well rewarded. And if you want it there's a job for you here. We lost ... well, I dunno, five, maybe eight troopers dead.'

'I heard Scottish Kev was working here.'

'He was dead, but now alive and found. You just missed him, on that ambulance you passed on the way in – burns on the hands and face, not serious by the looks of it.'

'He was the training sergeant for me and Dave –' he thumbed towards a man stood to his side. '- when we first joined. 1981.'

Johnno slowly nodded. 'Kev left a year after I was badged. C'mon, let's get you a cuppa,' he encouraged, leading them inside.

2

Beesely stood as Johnno introduced Bilbo. 'Well done in Bulgaria.'

Bilbo and his gang glanced at the French, the pictures and then stood bewildered in front of Beesely's desk.

Johnno pointed them towards the chairs that the French had used. 'Grab a pew.' Into the desk phone Johnno ordered four mugs of tea.

Bilbo's gang pulled the chairs forwards and started on some of the biscuits and doughnuts, the French still stood inspecting the paintings and busy making arrangements on their phones.

'Sir,' came from the desk phone.

'Yes?'

'Mr. Davies, Managing Director of McAvoy Construction, responsible for bridge repairs – as requested.'

'Put him through.' Beesely offered a flat palm to Bilbo's men.

'Hello?'

'Mr. Davies?'

'Yes, who the hell is that?'

'My name is Sir Morris Beesely –'

'Never heard of you. Why are you waking me, at home, this early on a Sunday?' Davies growled.

'Perhaps you should put on Sky News, Mr. Davies. Then you would notice that car bombs have gone off on both bridges over the River Severn.'

'What?' Davies shrieked. 'Car bombs?'

'Yes, Mr. Davies. But the damage is not great - we were lucky. The Severn Tunnel was also subjected to a terrorist attack, as was a bridge that is part of the M50 motorway.'

Bilbo's gang listened with wide-eye curiosity, the French now closing in and listening.

'My God,' Mr. Davies let out. 'Was it, you know, al-Qa'eda or something?'

'I can't discuss the security specifics, since I am ... *involved* with British Security.'

'Oh ... right. That's why you're calling me?'

'Not quite.' Beesely paused, taking a breath. 'I'm going to deliver ten million pounds, in cash, to you today.'

'You are? Why?'

‘For the emergency repairs that you, Mr. Davies, are going to make to the bridges.’

‘I am?’

‘Yes, Mr. Davies, you are. And if you do a good job and get those bridges open, partially or otherwise on Monday morning, there will be a gentleman popping around with a million pounds in used twenties for you.’

‘Wow. Who did you say you were again?’

‘Never mind, just get those bridges repaired. I want every able bodied man you have flat out working today – pay them treble-time if you like – and around the clock till the repairs are made. Do you understand, Mr. Davies?’

‘Yes, yes. I’ll ... er ... wake up my team.’

‘I’ll call you in a few hours, when you’ve made an assessment of the damage.’ Beesely hung up as mugs of tea were brought in. Stretching his back he said, ‘Thank you, once again, gentlemen, for what you did. We will probably get some useful intel’ off the people you ... *offed*.’ He faced the French. ‘Soon have you out of here. Please, grab some chairs.’ Turning back to Bilbo he asked, ‘What, exactly, did they want you to do?’

‘They wanted us to kill some pissy frog Ambassador to Switzerland, then make it look like it was your lot.’

Johnno laughed, a dirty, sarcastic laugh.

‘What?’ Bilbo asked, glancing from face to face, Beesely thumbing towards the French Ambassador. ‘What?’ Bilbo repeated, glancing now at the French.

‘Pleased to make your acquaintance,’ the Ambassador offered in his distinct French accent. ‘I am the *pissy frog Ambassador*.’

‘You are?’ Bilbo asked, he and his gang now concerned.

Johnno laughed again, shaking his head.

‘I am. And who did you say wanted me killed?’

‘Well, er, Sir, the Bulgarians hiring us didn’t say who their paymaster was, just the job and the payout.’ He

retrieved a piece of paper, unfolded it and handed it to the Ambassador. The French all squinted at it.

‘My schedule for yesterday and today!’ the Ambassador gasped.

‘How did they get that?’ Pascal asked, clearly angered.

‘We altered the schedule at the last minute,’ Henry explained to the room.

‘Lucky,’ Beesely pointed out. ‘But I don’t think that these gentlemen would have accepted such an assignment, no matter how well paid.’

Bilbo and his gang offered less-than-sincere headshakes, glared at by Beesely.

Pascal stood and took out his phone. ‘If you will excuse me for a moment, I have a call to make.’ He stepped out onto the walkway and out of view.

‘Have a coffee,’ Beesely suggested to the Ambassador. ‘You look a little ... flushed.’

The Ambassador took a loud breath. ‘It has been a very strange night. One I would rather forget.’

A manager walked in. ‘Sir, this is the list of possessions from the Bulgarians.’ He laid out several sheets. ‘Plus provisional phone and credit card use.’

‘We’d better get back to the war,’ Johno suggested. Beesely nodded his reluctant agreement as Otto and Johno stood and began studying the lists. ‘What’s a *senator*?’ Johno asked no one in particular.

‘Nautical term,’ Beesely explained. ‘Key fob made out of rope thread, it floats when you drop your boat keys in the water.’

‘So what the fuck are these Bulgarian gangsters doing with one in Sofia?’ Johno asked.

‘The chap must have been a sailor,’ Beesely suggested.

‘They didn’t look like the yacht type,’ Bilbo put it.

Otto made eye contact with the manager. ‘A map of Bulgaria.’ The manager rushed out.

‘There’s a *pass* listed here,’ Johnno stated. ‘For a marina of some sort.’

‘Marinas have boats,’ Beesely reminded Johnno. ‘And boats can travel from country to country – often undetected.’

Otto nodded as he thought. ‘So, Luchenkov left Russia by boat, across the Black Sea to Bulgaria?’

‘Burgas,’ Johnno carefully mouthed to Otto after reading from the page.

‘Which is just a short sailing time to the Bosphorous Straits through Turkey and on to the Mediterranean,’ Beesely unhappily pointed out. ‘That could get him to North Africa or through the Suez Canal.’

Otto pressed a button on the desk phone. ‘This is Otto. Luchenkov may be on a yacht in Burgas, Bulgaria. Move assets from Hungary and Austria immediately, replacing our team in Sofia. Send them to Burgas Marina by helicopter immediately.’

‘May be lucky,’ Johnno said with a sigh. ‘But I reckon he’s on a yacht, probably off the coast of Turkey.’

Beesely pressed a button. ‘Get me Oliver Stanton.’ He waited.

‘Beesely? You alone now?’ Stanton asked.

‘No, but we’ve given them their paintings,’ he said, eyeing the French. ‘Listen, need to borrow the US Mediterranean Fleet for a few days.’

The French stared intently.

‘What for?’ Stanton asked.

‘Our good friend Luchenkov is, most likely, sailing a yacht – no doubt a very comfortable one – around from Bulgaria to ... well, somewhere in the Med’, North Africa maybe.’

‘We log every ship going through the Bosphorous Straits. Do you know which is his?’

‘Nope. But it will, most likely, be Russian or Ukraine owned, and have men in black polo-neck jumpers with machineguns on the decks.’

‘I’ll get back to you, try and narrow it down.’ He hung up with a click. Beesely swivelled his chair and faced the Ambassador.

After five seconds the Ambassador asked, ‘Something?’

‘Yes. I was just wondering if you wanted to ... lend a hand.’

‘How ... exactly?’

‘I could do with *someone* who has good diplomatic links and influence with the North African states, contacting those states and asking them nicely if they wouldn’t mind refusing entry to the man who just tried to kill you.’

Pascal and the Ambassador stood, glancing at each other then nodding. ‘I have some calls to make,’ the Ambassador informed them as he stepped outside. Pascal lifted his phone and stepped to the end of the room.

‘Herr Blaum is here,’ came from the phone.

‘Now comes the hard part,’ Johnno quietly suggested. Beesely faced him and waited, a puzzled, expectant look. ‘Fifty dead, two hundred wounded, explosions loud enough to be heard in Bern, car bombs all over Switzerland. Guess he’s going to give us our marching orders back to the UK.’

Beesely swivelled his chair to Otto, who now lowered his head, rubbing his face.

‘Is you woman still here?’ Johnno asked Otto.

Otto lifted his head and gave a quick nod.

‘Don’t let the frogs leave till we’ve made a deal,’ Johnno suggested, Beesely watching him over his shoulder.

‘Yes,’ Beesely agreed, sounding tired. ‘One more thing on the list.’

Blaum walked in, flanked by two guards. No one stood to greet him, but the French Ambassador was well known to him and they shook, exchanging a few sentences in French.

‘My God, Beesely,’ Blaum let out with a heavy sigh, dragging a chair closer and sitting.

‘Anyone hurt by the car bombs?’ Beesely asked.

‘No,’ Blaum answered. ‘The police, and your people, found and disabled six car bombs. Placed in a hurry, according to the bomb disposal people. Still, if they had gone off...’

‘Yes, a problem,’ Beesely quietly admitted. ‘So where do we stand, Max? What’s going to be the fall out from all this?’

Blaum offered them apologetic look. ‘The publicity will be terrible. For us all.’

‘And the deaths here?’ Johno asked.

Blaum turned his head to face Johno. ‘To keep such a thing quiet will be impossible.’

‘Then we blame Luchenkov for taking his revenge,’ Beesely suggested. ‘We tell the world he fired a rocket at us here, killing fifty and wounding two hundred.’

‘What will the Swiss public say?’ Johno asked.

Blaum shrugged. ‘They would prefer a quiet country, of course.’

‘Recruitment could be hard,’ Johno suggested, staring at the floor.

‘Up four thousand percent,’ Otto muttered.

‘What?’ Beesely asked, facing him.

‘Since you came here, recruitment is up four thousand percent from before,’ Otto explained, his head still lowered. ‘For every position we have available we have four hundred applications.’

‘We do?’ Johno asked, amazed.

‘After the last attack we had over one thousand applications from police and soldiers here, in Germany and Austria. From the town we have fifty people applying for each administrative position. And they know the risks.’

‘Has anyone left?’ Beesely asked.

‘Some women with families moved to other areas. A few men moved elsewhere.’

Johno stood and moved to the front of Beesely’s desk, sitting on the desk and facing Blaum. ‘What do *you* say,

Max? You think Switzerland would be better off without us?’

Blaum considered Johnno’s words, taking a measured breath and straightening. ‘When I ... travel around Europe, and deal with Ministers from other countries, I get a great deal more respect now than I did before. Before we were just ‘small Switzerland’. Now people ask me for help and advice as if I was ... the President of the United States.

‘Last week, a Swiss diplomat was kidnapped in Nigeria. I called the Nigerian Ambassador and asked if he wanted help from K2’s hostage rescue teams. He oddly refused. A few hours later our diplomat was suddenly released. I called their Ambassador to thank him, but he could not apologise enough.’

‘*Our* reputation ... is preceding you,’ Beesely pointed out.

‘So, Max?’ Johnno pressed. ‘If our status was *your* personal choice, what would you do?’

‘I would keep you here, of course,’ he replied, strong eye contact with Johnno. ‘I have never met such people as you before, you and Beesely, and probably never will again. You are worth probably more than a billion pounds, yet here you sit, in danger, trying to stop terrorists instead of sitting on a beach. I have never met a more ... *noble* group of people.’

Johnno walked back to a side seat, head lowered and thinking, being closely observed by Bilbo and his men. He slumped down. Beesely breathed out loudly as he ran a hand over his bald scalp, closely observed by a concerned Otto.

Johnno lifted his head and made eye contact with Blaum. ‘If we weren’t here, Max, those fifty bodies upstairs would be at home with their wives, along with the rest ... those who’ve died since we got here. I’ll swap you our billions for them if you can arrange it.’

Beesely sat silent. Blaum lowered his head and rested his elbows on his knees.

Otto pressed a button on the desk phone. 'All managers, and Grade Three staff and above, are to meet in the command centre immediately.' He stood and walked out of the office.

Beesely watched him go, then faced Johnno, the two men exchanging slight frowns. They both slowly stood.

Otto waited at the top of the steps as staff assembled, directing the guard commanders along the walkway or down to the lower level. Five minutes later they were assembled.

Otto walked to the middle of the stairs and waited till the background chatter fell. 'K2 staff,' he called. 'We have... a problem. Not including those who have died in previous misadventures in recent months we have, tonight, lost perhaps fifty dead and suffered two hundred wounded.'

It did not come as a shock since they already knew most of the details.

Otto continued, 'And now we face the possibility that the publicity will expose us to the people of Switzerland and the wider world. The loss of our people is terrible, not least for their family's sake. The compensation paid will be very high, the cost of repairing this facility also very high. But these are just facts and figures.'

The French spread out along the walkway, along with Bilbo's group. Beesely and Johnno had moved around to the top of the walkway steps and now stood keenly listening.

'The real problem is something else.' Otto pointed an accusing finger at Johnno. 'The problem is Johnno,' he loudly stated.

People turned and stared, perplexed. Beesely raised his eyebrows in surprise, Johnno hardly reacting.

'Johnno is afraid,' Otto added. Now people were giving very confused looks towards Johnno, and each other. Otto continued, 'He is afraid ... that so many of our people have been killed ... that we will not stand by him, that we will wish that he and Beesely had never arrived here.'

The confusion quickly ebbed away and the faces hardened. People straightened.

'They ... did not start this fight!' a voice shouted.

A manager stepped forwards. 'We did not ask Luchukov to attack London.' Murmurings of agreement shot around the room. 'He started this, not Johnno or Herr Beesely!'

Otto slowly turned and took in the faces. 'Who's fault was the nerve gas attack here?' He waited. 'Mine.' People stood shaking their heads. 'I cut ties with Nazi groups that Gunter favoured. My choice.' He pointed at himself. 'And a choice that cost Herr Beesely his daughter's life!'

'Who asked the CIA to attack us? No one, we just happened to be hosting their illegal experiments in Switzerland. But we stopped them and sent back their mercenary army.' Strong murmurings of approval shot around the room. 'And if we had not stopped Luchukov and his dirty bombs, thousands may have died in London, the economy of Europe destroyed.'

'We did not start this fight!' a manager shouted. 'But we will finish it!' A sedate cheer of approval swept around the room. The same man loudly stated, 'We do not give in to terrorists! And K2 backs down to no one!'

Another sedate Swiss cheer swept around the command centre.

'No matter how many of our people they kill, we should stand and fight!' another manager shouted.

Another chorus of approval swept the large room.

Otto raised his hands, the room falling quiet after a few seconds. In a normal voice he said, 'Johnno, we are Swiss. We have never fought or won a war, and we are a small nation – a nation that some joke is just a third of France, a third of Germany and third of Italy - not a proper country at all, picture postcard little Switzerland. But we *are* stubborn.'

Many smiles creased into cheeks.

‘We do not like being pushed around or told what to do.’ He took a breath, his chest rising and falling. ‘If you ask us to fight, we will fight – no matter the risk or the losses. We no longer kill or threaten people for Gunter’s greed, we take on the world’s terrorists!’

A loud chorus of approval shot around the room.

Otto waited a moment then raised his hands. ‘Who here blames Johno for the deaths ... of *any* of our people?’ He slowly turned as people glanced around the room, staff looking at each other. Finally he came full circle. No one had raised a hand or made a comment. ‘Who here is ready to stand in harm’s way ... if Johno asks it of them?’

Everyone raised their arms, even the young lady receptionists in their alcoves around the companionway, all eyes focusing on Johno.

Otto offered Johno a confident smile. ‘You have your answer, Johno.’

Johno glanced at Beesely, his features neutral.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ Beesely called. ‘We have a war to win!’

Another approving chorus echoed around the room.

‘To your work stations,’ Otto ordered, climbing the steps.

People started to move, either quickly out of the command centre or back to their desks. Unknown to Otto, Marie stood watching from the doorway of the photocopy room, stunned and wide-eyed.

4

Back in Beesely’s office the French sat, whispering amongst themselves. Bilbo’s gang sat back down, offering each other confused looks as Johno, Beesely and Otto wandered back in. Blaum grabbed a lukewarm coffee and sipped it.

Beesely pulled his chair forwards, offering Otto a welcoming – and proud - smile. Otto smiled back. Beesely began, ‘So, gentlemen, how do we save this situation?’

Blaum suggested, ‘We simply say that a missile was fired at you, killing and wounding your staff. The numbers can be played down. Since that is mostly true and, I understand, you have the launch lorry, we have the evidence for the papers and TV of Europe.’

‘And the car bombs we blame on Luchenkov,’ Otto suggested, ‘making some disappear, just two car bombs and the one that went off. We don’t want to worry the tourists or the Swiss people.’

‘Yes, good,’ Beesely agreed. ‘Question remains, who the British Government are going to blame for their car bombs? I seriously doubt they wish to name Luchenkov. Even if the British Government doesn’t want to blame the Russians the British people will see it that way.’

‘There is a solution,’ came a French voice. It was Pascal. ‘If Luchenkov was somehow ... *connected* to al-Qa’eda, it would please the British Government, and *others*, plus discredit Luchenkov in the eyes of the world’s media.’

‘I like you,’ Beesely said. ‘You’re a sneaky little bastard.’

Pascal smiled and tipped his head.

Beesely faced Blaum. ‘OK, get yourself on the TV cameras, Max. Two car bombs, one that went off, a missile at us, twenty dead, fifty wounded, a warning sent to you from Luchenkov, but the car bombs showing signs of typical al-Qa’eda involvement. We’ll provide you with suitable material and fingerprints.’

Blaum stood. ‘Fingers crossed. But there is another problem.’ He faced the French. And waited. Beesely and Otto turned to the French, also waiting.

Pascal stood. ‘My Government will be condemning this cowardly attack on a Swiss bank, and the attack in Paris - which will have all the hallmarks of al-Qa’eda. My

government will also be condemning the planned attack on our Ambassador to Switzerland by al-Qa'eda, an attack that was thwarted by ... *Swiss Intelligence Services*.'

The Ambassador stood and shook Blaum's hand. 'Do thank your ... *Intelligence Services* for me, I shall be doing so in writing – accidentally leaking it.'

Guards entered and pointed towards the paintings, Otto waving them in. The paintings filed out.

'I guess your transport is here,' Beesely suggested as he stood. 'Please ... have a safe journey, I will be in touch later today, no doubt.' He shook their hands in turn as they filed out, keenly observed by Bilbo and his gang. Beesely sat back down and jabbed at the desk phone. 'British Prime Minister, please.'

Bilbo's men glanced at each other.

'What happened to those breakfasts?' Johnno complained.

Otto stood and stepped out.

'Sir Morris?' came a deep voice from the desk phone.

'Prime Minister. Are you at Chequers yet?'

'No, should I be?'

'Yes.'

'Oh? Do you have any fresh information?'

'If we did you would have it before you thought about it. No, what I would like to request, Prime Minister, is for you to blame these car bombs on al-Qa'eda, and not Luchenkov.'

'At the moment, Sir Morris, we have no firm leads on exactly who is behind it.'

'Trust me, Prime Minister, *it is* Luchenkov.'

'Why the shift in blame?'

'Do you want the British public against Moscow, Prime Minister?' Beesely delicately posed.

There was a long pause. 'That would be an awkward situation, as you well know.'

'Yes, people would blame the country, not the person.'

'What are you suggesting, Sir Morris?'

‘That I deal with the matter, once and for all, and that a hint is made towards al-Qa’eda, no mention of Luchenkov yet, but later some links between him and them. You’ll find... *international* support for that idea, sir.’

‘Discuss this matter with the Intelligence Chiefs. If they present a report I will go with it. Beyond that I cannot be having this conversation.’ He hung up.

Breakfasts were brought in. The lady said, ‘Sorry, sir, we have re-heated them, everything is a bit chaotic.’

‘No problem at all,’ Beesely offered.

The smell caused the men to close in quickly, all except Otto, who seemed mildly disgusted with the chosen meal. Johnno tucked in, along with Bilbo and his gang.

Beesely tried some egg and then hit a button. ‘Elle Rosen, Mossad.’

‘Yes, sir.’ He waited.

‘Beesely?’ Elle called a few seconds later.

‘You sound fresh and awake?’ Beesely noted.

‘How do I normally sound?’ Elle asked. ‘Half asleep?’

‘You normally sound just fine, Elle, it’s just that I thought you may be asleep at this hour.’

‘Tel Aviv woke me an hour ago. All I needed was to hear mention of your name and I was wide awake and worrying.’

‘Is someone being facetious?’ Beesely nudged.

‘Does it show?’

‘A bit, yes. Listen, we’re going to fake a link between Luchenkov and al-Qa’eda, instead of blaming him straight.’

‘Why?’

‘Various governments do not wish to blame him, fearing their populations may blame the Russians as a whole.’

‘Understood.’

‘Right, next. Are you sitting down?’

‘Yes, and now even more worried.’

‘I want half-a-dozen of your al-Qa’eda prisoners – those on death row – killed, frozen, placed in freeze containers and flown over to me.’

‘What in God’s name are you up to, Beesely?’

‘What do *you* think I’m up to, smart man like you?’ Beesely winked at Johnno.

‘You’re going to stick them in a car that got blown up?’

‘Well done,’ Beesely loudly congratulated him.

Johnno shouted, ‘If you were here I’d let you have some of my crispy bacon.’

‘Johnno?’ Elle loudly called.

‘Yes?’

‘Fuck off!’

Beesely turned back from Johnno, still scowling, to the phone. ‘Call me if you cannot deliver the goods.’

‘I’ll get back to you ... after you’ve finished your breakfast.’

Thomas wandered in, blood on his clothes. With head low he walked around to Johnno. ‘I am sorry for sleeping before.’

Johnno glanced at Beesely from under his eyebrows. ‘And I’m sorry for shouting at you. You’re twelve years old, not a man yet. We OK, son?’

Bilbo’s men again glanced at each other, now wide-eyed.

Thomas nodded. ‘Yes, Boss,’ he quietly let out.

Johnno reached across and pinched Beesely’s cooked-breakfast, placing it in front of Thomas, who immediately tucked in.

‘Johnno ... you mind?’ Beesely called.

Johnno took a mouthful. ‘I’ve known you ... a long ... time,’ he said as he chewed. ‘You have *never* eaten an English breakfast.’

‘That’s not the point - you should have asked. You’re setting a bad example for the lad.’

Johno turned to Thomas. 'You download that latest Alison Star porn video?'

Thomas nodded as he tucked in. Then 'Steak' the bear bit Bilbo. Bilbo screamed and jumped up, more surprised than hurt. Beesely stood and looked over the desk as Steak sniffed the newcomers. Otto walked around and grabbed the bear by the scruff, sitting down with the bear on his lap.

'Bad idea,' Johno muttered as he chewed. 'Smells like Goldilocks' crutch in here.' Steak struggled, but Otto held him firm.

'Johno,' Bilbo called, focused on the bear. 'I'm starting to think this place is just the little bit crazy.'

'And you'd be right,' Beesely informed him, nibbling on a bread roll. 'Anyway -' He faced Otto. '- some money for these gentlemen, hundred thousand pounds a piece for starters.' Otto nodded. Beesely continued, 'Do you gentlemen want a job? We could use your help.' He waited.

Bilbo glanced at his men before facing Beesely squarely. 'Doing what, exactly?'

'For starters, extra security around here,' Beesely explained. 'Then, snatch or kill missions, recon'. Usual stuff, right up your street.'

'We discussed it before, when we spoke to Pete,' Bilbo explained, sitting back. 'Just didn't know what really went on around here.'

Johno said, 'We need you, even if for just a few months.'

'Well,' Bilbo began. 'A humble Johno Williams. Never thought I'd see the day.'

'Did you think,' Beesely began, 'that you would see him adopt a boy with a pet bear, then live in a dungeon?'

'Dungeon?' one of Bilbo's men repeated, a slight frown evident.

'I live in the castle dungeon,' Johno mentioned as he ate.

'It's a crazy place,' Bilbo let out, shaking his head.

'Well?' Johno asked, straightening.

‘I’ll give it a go,’ Bilbo answered, turning to the first man. That man nodded, so did the next.

The final man asked, ‘What’s the pay again?’

‘Fifty grand a year, tax free,’ Johnno stated. ‘All billets, food and drink thrown in, plus hookers. Extra dosh on operations.’

‘Hookers?’ the man asked, wide eyed.

‘On tap,’ Johnno answered.

‘Not in front of Thomas,’ Beesely quietly requested.

‘Who do you think drives him to school?’ Johnno posed.

‘Marge,’ Otto put in.

Beesely let out a resigned sigh. He faced the last man. ‘Give it some thought. Now, Johnno, take the guests downstairs, I need a rest.’

Otto carried the bear out, followed slowly by Bilbo’s gang, Johnno closing the door. Glancing at the door, Beesely started to pick at the leftover crispy bacon, strictly against the K2 doctors’ orders, but a minute later a kitchen worker collected all of the trays, sent in by Otto.

‘This is where you live?’ Bilbo asked, exiting the cramped lift with Steak in his arms.

Johnno pointed. ‘Office, computer, bar, fridge, gym, shooting range, bedroom, sauna, Jacuzzi ... sofa. Did I miss anything?’

‘Fuck,’ the second man let out, taking in the room.

Thomas got the kettle on, retrieving mugs, opening the fridge and placing a box of cream cakes and doughnuts on the sofa’s coffee table without a word.

‘Take a seat,’ Johnno suggested to his old comrades. He lifted his phone as he took off his jacket, placing it to his right ear, the left still buzzing. ‘Report.’ He listened for a minute. ‘Get me an update in an hour and send someone to wake me if there’re any developments. Oh, arrange rooms in Zug for four new ex-SAS, team leader is Bilbo – enter them

into the computer. Yeah, that guy, they're now working for us, Grade Two, compound. Ta, love.'

'Grade Two?' a man queried.

'All the troopers start at Grade Two, go through the usual bollocks induction – how we work, who's who, map of the bases, local customs, bla bla bla.'

Thomas placed down five mugs of white tea and a sugar bowl.

'Who's blood?' Johno asked, pointing towards Thomas's jumper.

'Mickey Morgan,' Thomas quietly answered.

'Mickey Morgan?' Bilbo repeated. 'He's here?'

'What's left of him,' Johno answered. He faced Thomas. 'What are his injuries?'

'Left arm gone.' Thomas made a cutting motion across his elbow. 'They took it off, what was left.'

'Shit,' Bilbo slowly let out. He faced Johno. 'What'll happen to him now?'

The guests grabbed their teas and sat. Johno turned to Thomas. 'See if there is a doctor free?'

'You hurt?' Thomas asked.

Johno nodded, Thomas in the lift a second later. He faced Bilbo. 'Mickey? He'll get a couple hundred grand compensation, couple a month's in re-hab', then a choice.'

'Choice?' Bilbo asked.

Johno shrugged. 'If he wants to stay here we'll give him something to do, or he can teach the newbies. His call.'

'Seems pretty good care you take of the boys,' Bilbo noted, sipping his tea.

'Why not? Know what Beesely's worth? *Personally* worth?' They waited. 'Take what our government spends on its *entire* military in five years.' The men stared in abject surprise. Johno added, 'He inherited an entire Swiss banking group. Since then we've just had luck after luck with money. The other week we found a billion in gold tucked away in a cave above us.'

‘You ... *found* ... a billion in gold?’ Bilbo gasped.

‘Was there for forty years odd. We went looking for it in the Czech’ republic, all the time it was frigging here. What most people don’t know is that the previous owner of the bank, Gunter – Nazi fucker, stole half the crown jewels of Europe in the war ... and lots of gold. Most of it’s still here under the sofa.’

‘Like those paintings you gave the Frogs,’ a man stated.

Johno nodded, sipping his tea.

‘If they were worth millions, why give them back for fuck’s sake?’ Bilbo asked.

‘Politics,’ Johno carefully mouthed. ‘Besides, got more money than we know what to do with.’

‘What do *you* earn?’ a man asked.

Johno laughed. They waited.

‘What so funny?’ Bilbo asked. ‘You Grade Three or something?’

Johno laughed even harder.

‘Well?’ Bilbo firmly pressed, thrusting his face forwards.

‘If I want a Learjet - Beesely gets me one. He treats me like the son he never had, poor guy.’

‘Cushy,’ a man muttered.

‘We have a rule here, for when I’m in the village. If I enter a restaurant then any K2 or bank staff eat or drink for free.’

‘Must make you popular,’ Bilbo suggested. ‘Makes up for the ugly mug.’

They laughed, a stern-faced doctor appearing as the lift doors opened.

Johno faced him, suddenly serious. ‘All the wounded out?’

The doctor nodded. ‘Where you hit?’

‘Left ear is funny, buzzing and clicking since I was blown up.’

‘That tends to happen,’ the doctor began, looking like he was dragged away from something more important, ‘when you get blown up. But I would have thought you were used to it by now.’ He started to examine the ear. ‘You may have punctured the eardrum, maybe some damage to the inner ear.’ He grabbed Johno’s head firmly, looking into the ear. ‘Mein Gott, there is more mud in your ear than the lake.’

Taking out a few cotton-swabs he cleared the mud, the last swab red with blood. ‘Yes, I think the drum is ruptured. You must get to a specialist quickly, or you could get an infection and affect the hearing in this ear.’

‘Could they do it here?’ Johno asked.

The doctor straightened, giving it some thought. ‘Yes.’

‘Get someone from a different canton,’ Johno suggested. ‘I don’t want anyone local, we need them where they are.’

‘I’ll get a team from Bern - specialists. Don’t blow your nose, no alcohol. Any other injuries?’

‘Just cuts. Thomas can do those.’

The doctor stepped into the lift a second later.

‘The doctors come to you?’ Bilbo noted. ‘Very posh.’

Johno sipped his tea. ‘No expense spared around here, buddy. But as soon as Beesely sees the report on my ear he’ll jump up and down ... make sure they fix me up right.’

‘Cushy,’ a man repeated.

‘And could be for you, too!’ Johno emphasised. He noticed Thomas stood waiting at his side. ‘Go and sleep if you want, I’ll wake you if anything happens.’

‘See ya later, guys,’ Thomas said in his best attempt at an American accent, making Johno smile. He headed off to bed.

‘He’s your kid?’ Bilbo asked.

‘Adopted.’

Bilbo shook his head. ‘Never thought you were the type.’

‘Me neither,’ Johno agreed. ‘But things have changed a lot in the last few months. We moved here, Beesely’s

daughter Jane was killed, Ricky killed, we fought off the CIA and a mercenary army, got stuck in a Nazi cave. I hardly ever think of my life before, back at the old house.'

'So why aren't you sat on a beach?' Bilbo quietly asked, slouching lower and relaxing, legs stretched out and crossed.

'Be bored pretty quickly - me and Beesely,' Johno replied, staring out of focus towards the coffee table. 'This is where the action is.' He lifted his gaze. 'I'd rather do something ... worthwhile.'

'Johno to the drawbridge!' burst from his phone.

Johno slowed eased up. 'Make yourselves at home, crash out, rooms upstairs or in the barracks, please yourselves.'

5

At the drawbridge Johno found three guards holding a junior guard like a prisoner, Simon and a manager stood next to them as a small crowd gathered.

'Explain,' Johno quietly called as he drew level.

Simon faced the 'prisoner', the man held in the kneeling position. 'He ran from his post.'

'He what?' Johno shouted.

'He ran,' the manager repeated, staring down the prisoner.

Johno inched closer. 'What do you have to say for yourself?' he demanded. The man lowered his head, his eyes tearful, nothing forthcoming. Johno faced Simon. 'What's the normal punishment?'

'He is the first, as far as I know,' Simon responded, shrugging.

Johno faced the manager and waited.

The manager said, 'They are warned upon joining that they would *get the chair* for something like this.'

Johno gave it a moment's thought then drew his pistol. The two guards flanking the prisoner let go and stepped away. 'Stand up!'

The prisoner glanced at the faces, then slowly stood, clearly terrified. Quite a crowd had now gathered.

‘I guess you didn’t hear the big speech earlier,’ Johnno commented. He fired quickly, two shots, both kneecaps, the prisoner falling backwards and screaming.

Johnno holstered his weapon. ‘Fix him up, take him to the hospital. He’s out of K2, but I want him kept alive – he’ll be a good advert for new recruits and those thinking of joining.’

Guards dragged the man away as Johnno took Simon by the arm and led him to a quiet corner. ‘You agree with what I just did?’

‘I would have killed him,’ Simon responded.

‘How will the men see this punishment?’

‘I doubt this man will live long. He’ll probably move away as soon as he can. If the men see him in the town they’ll hurt him.’

Johnno turned his head as applause began, Marco being led into the courtyard.

‘That’s the man called Marco,’ Simon explained. ‘He drove the car bomb away.’

‘One out, one in,’ Johnno muttered, walking across. ‘Symmetry, eh?’

Marco halted, being patted on the back by passing guards. ‘You are Johnno.’

Johnno shook his hand. ‘Well done in the town.’

‘Thank you,’ Marco said, beaming a large smile. ‘I have heard all the stories about you, sir. It’s an honour.’

‘You looking for a job, Marco?’ Johnno asked.

Marco seemed stunned. ‘Here?’

‘Why not, you’ve earned it.’

‘I failed the medical and application, sir. Three times.’

‘So did I,’ Johnno pointed out, wiggling his eyebrows. ‘So you just passed.’

Johnno waved over a manager, the man greeting Marco with a warm smile. 'New employee, compound guard, Grade Two, fix it. And a twenty thousand euro bonus.'

Marco stood proudly taller. 'Thank you, sir,' he said as he was led away.

'That evens things out a bit,' Johnno muttered. Simon nodded, the two of them watching Marco walk inside, the new recruit glancing up at the courtyard roof like a tourist.

'I'm too awake to sleep,' Johnno commented, 'so let's get things sorted.' He raised his phone. 'All Guard Commanders and Compound Managers to the drawbridge.' He and Simon walked into the early morning haze, the tarmac busy with vehicles, guards walking by or jogging past in groups. Guard Commanders started to assemble as Johnno took in the disaster scene.

'OK,' he began, taking a deep breath. 'A' Squadron stays on alert in the town, 'B' comes back and rests till 6pm tonight, then they swap. 'C' Squadron on standby, front of the castle, 'D' Squadron recalled and rested till 6pm.

'Simon, your best thirty men, cleaned, fed and rested, back on at 6pm all night, West Gate. The rest stay on the west gate for now. All reserve guards and units to report here, plus anyone we can use for clean-up duties.

'OK, this ... fucking ... stinking ... pond mud, I want washed down straight away, get some hoses and let's make this place habitable, huh?'

He pointed to the right of the castle. 'Right, section off an area to the west of the castle, ten yards perimeter from the base of the castle walls, then I want a human chain of men with gloves up in the restaurant dumping *everything* over the side as fast as possible. Two hours from now I want our builders to make an assessment.'

He faced the East Camp, the men following his gaze. 'For the rest of the compound I want all windows and walls fixed as best we can today, remove all the rubble. If we need

to move around tonight I don't want to be falling over bricks in the dark. Yeah?'

He turned the opposite way. 'OK. The West Gate I want blocked temporarily by a lorry or two – and let's get cleaning that up, again an assessment from the builders.

He turned fully around. 'Right, all spare bodies I want going around the compound. I want *all* bushes and branches below two metres ripped down - this place is way too easy to sneak around in. I want the bushes and branches of the trees where we shot the intruders trimmed back ... *before* nightfall!'

He faced the lake, not visible through the mist. 'Are the pillboxes OK?'

'Yes,' Simon answered. 'But both night crews in hospital for now.'

Johno nodded. 'OK, cliff top?'

'Eight up there,' Simon answered. '66mm, fifty cal's and missiles, plus we just got the first batch of fifty cal' machineguns.'

Johno perked up. 'Really? When did they arrive?'

'About twenty minutes ago,' Simon answered, rolling his eyes.

Johno offered him a sympathetic look. 'Where are they?'

'Two went straight up the cliff with two thousand rounds, four more in store.'

'Could they go on that small roof above the drawbridge?' Men glanced up.

'One could,' Simon suggested, glancing up and around.

'Stick one up there,' Johno encouraged. 'What about the pillboxes?'

'Not much room for them,' Simon suggested.

'OK, I want two on the backs of vehicles then. In time... some purpose built vehicle, but for now any which way to get them mobile.' Men took notes as Johno lit up.

'Johno?' came from his phone, a man's voice he did not recognise.

He lifted it. 'Yeah?'

'Swiss Army is here, sir.'

Johno took in the surprised faces. 'Really? Why? And who sent them?'

'Don't know, sir.'

'You've verified who they are?'

'Yes, sir. The commanders are personally known to Otto. The Colonel, he's my old boss in the Army.'

'Let them in then, send their commander to me.' He walked slowly to the East Road and waited with the rest of the Guard Commanders, all now curious.

Eight armoured troop transports, painted a shiny dark blue, drove noisily up the east road belching dark smoke, followed by two jeeps and two lorries. The jeeps and lorries were, however, a suitable pale green colour. The armoured transports rumbled past and halted on the grass just beyond the drawbridge, the jeeps pulling up next to Johno. As several officers clambered out of the jeeps the lorries hissed to a stop. Troops began to jump down.

'You must be Johno,' the first officer said, putting out a hand.

'Welcome to the castle,' Johno offered, shaking the Colonel's hand.

The officer smiled at Simon. 'Hello again, Simon.' They shook, observed by Johno. Other officers made similar greetings with Guard Commanders as their troops formed up.

'Well,' Johno began, 'if it's not a rude question, what are you doing here?'

'Minister Blaum and the head of the Army sent us ... to help in any way we can,' the Colonel explained.

'Nice of them,' Johno offered, studying the troops falling in, in particular their neatly ironed uniforms and shined boots.

'Where would you like us?' the same officer asked.

‘You could be most use on the West Gate, which is just a pile of rubble at the moment. If you can use those troop carriers to block the road that would be a great help.’

The senior Swiss officer, the Colonel, turned his head and nodded to a Captain, the man heading off straight away for the transports.

‘What else?’ the Colonel asked.

‘The remaining men could save us some time,’ Johnno suggested. He faced Simon. ‘Pull your people from the West Compound – leave just a few.’ Turning back to the Colonel he said, ‘And if you could deploy your men through those trees –’ He pointed. ‘- checking for booby-traps ... then holding that section, that’d help a lot.’

The Colonel shouted orders and his men marched off.

‘Come on inside,’ Johnno said with wave, the Colonel and his deputy following, the Guard Commanders getting to work. In the foyer staff’s small restroom Johnno sat the officers down, ordering coffees from Mr. Freiserling.

‘We hear you were hit by a cruise missile?’ the Colonel asked, clearly concerned.

Johnno nodded. ‘It was an old Russian cruise missile, launched – quite ingeniously – from the back of a lorry. Then two remote controlled Cessna’s packed with explosives.’ He picked up a staff rota and idly read it.

‘My God,’ the Colonel let out, glancing at his deputy. ‘And the people behind this attack?’

‘Similar group to last time,’ Johnno explained, looking up. ‘Luchenkov.’

‘May I ask ... why all this has come about?’

Johnno eased back as far as his rigid chair would allow, making it squeak. ‘Simple. K2 stopped the dirty bombs heading for London.’ The officer’s expressions suggested some clarification of that comment was needed. ‘We got a tip-off about someone smuggling guns from the Ukraine to the West, so we intercepted it – tripping over the dirty bombs by accident. That made Luchenkov mad, so he came

after us. The Russians locked him up but he escaped, no doubt with some inside help. Now he's on the loose and hell bent on harming us any way he can.'

The Colonel took a moment to think. 'There are some - in the government - who believe you brought this on yourselves, and on Switzerland.'

'We did,' Johno flatly answered.

The Colonel blinked, glancing at his deputy. 'You did?'

Johno offered the Colonel a cold stare. 'We stopped London from being destroyed.' He shrugged. 'Sorry.'

The Colonel eased back and straightened. 'I did not mean it to sound like that -'

'What did you mean?' Johno nudged.

The officer adjusted his uniform. 'There are obviously those who consider that ... *things* may have been different, under Herr Gunter.'

'They would. London would be in ruins and the economy of Western Europe would be in tatters. Martial Law, economic collapse, people fighting over the last scrap of bread and milk.'

The Colonel took a slow breath and nodded to himself. 'Personally, I am on your side, but I follow orders.'

'*Don't we all*,' Johno carefully mouthed. He inched his face closer to the Colonel. 'But sometimes, doing the right thing comes at a heavy cost. No reward ... no medals.'

The Colonel studied Johno for several seconds. 'I had heard many stories about you ... but they do not seem to fit.'

'I just shot a guard who left his post, if that helps?'

The officers stared back. 'That would be more in keeping with what the stories say about you.'

Johno rubbed his moustache before picking up the staff rota again. 'So ... what do the Swiss, beyond K2 and Zug, think about all this? Because we already offered to resign once this morning.'

'You offered to ... resign?'

‘I offered to leave, if it would help save Swiss lives.’

‘And what happened?’ the Colonel puzzled.

‘They all wanted me to stay. Something about a small country not being kicked around by anyone, Swiss stubbornness ... and you don’t give in to terrorists.’

The Colonel again glanced at his deputy as drinks were placed down. Facing Johnno he said, ‘There is ... popular support here for ... a hard line against crime and terrorists.’

‘Obviously, or we wouldn’t exist,’ Johnno pointed out. ‘Your government knows what we do and supports it. So far.’

He let out an audible breath. ‘Look, guys, I’m sorry if we’ve dragged your country into this mess, but we didn’t start this - the Russians did. If we hadn’t intercepted those dirty bombs then the map of Europe would’ve been redrawn, and a right-wing dictator may have been elected in Russia – soon followed by a return to the cold war era. We also fucked up the CIA’s plans to develop bio-weapons on Swiss soil.’

‘What?’ the Colonel gasped.

Johnno lifted his eyebrows theatrically and nodded extra slowly. ‘Not much of what we do gets known. But you can be assured, guys, that every time some idiot surfaces in or near Switzerland we’re all over them – without the newspapers ever reporting it. We’re not here to make money for the bank anymore, we’re here to catch criminals and terrorists. And we’re spending *our money* to do so. But to repeat what I said here earlier, if you lot want us gone, we’ll go – no argument.’

‘It is ... not so simple. The horse has bolted, through no fault of your own, and is now stamping through our gardens.’

Johnno lit up. ‘We’d best catch the old nag then. And quickly. Then we’ll cut its balls off, roast them and feed ‘em to it.’

Home grown

1

An hour later Johnno walked into Beesely's office as managers started to assemble.

'How's the ear?' Beesely knowingly enquired.

'Sore,' Johnno replied as he slouched down, placing his MP5 onto the desk. He quickly grabbed a pad and paper from the desk and started to write.

Beesely observed him for a moment before addressing the group. 'OK, ladies and gentlemen, we have a lot to go through. First, and foremost, we need to find – and deal with – Luchenkov.'

'Our people are now in Burgas,' Otto informed the room. 'Searching the marina and boat berthing areas.'

'Good. Anything else on the dead Bulgarians?'

A manager lent forwards, 'Hardened criminals, with long records - not mercenaries. They were local to Sofia.'

'Anything useful on them?' Beesely asked.

'Numerous phone calls to and from their mobiles,' the same manager answered. 'But all within Bulgaria, some to an area near Burgas the day before.'

'What about the bodies of the people who attacked us?' Beesely enquired, Johnno raising his head.

'Mostly East European, but a very odd bunch,' Otto explained. 'Some Bulgarian, some Hungarian, two Russians, two from the Ukraine, a Turk ... and even an Egyptian.'

'Crikey, what a bag load,' Beesely commented.

Otto added, 'They seem to be criminals rather than mercenaries, but some are former soldiers.'

Johnno went back to his notes.

'So,' Beesely said, rubbing his eyes. 'Luchenkov is scraping the bottom of the barrel.'

Johnno eased upright. 'Which brings us onto the next point.' Everyone focused on him. 'These car bombs are

amateur time, they're a distraction from the main event. He's got something planned, something nasty – and that's where we need our resources. Catching him is secondary to stopping a big fucking bomb going off.'

Beesely lowered his head, thinking. 'Yes,' he finally let out. 'That's a worry. Question is, where does he hit – the UK or here?'

'I've been thinking about the bomb maker,' Johnno announced to the room, still writing. He faced the managers. 'Take notes,' he carefully mouthed. 'First, I think he's British. He had a good working knowledge of those bridges and the tunnel. A foreigner would have stuck a bomb in London, this fucker was quite inventive in the targets, if not the bombs. He's an amateur for sure, with limited explosives knowledge -'

'Why do you say that?' Beesely challenged. 'Just because they failed to go off?'

'No, nothing wrong with a simple mechanism ... if it goes bang. I'm all in favour of keeping it simple, but he hit the middle of the bridges. Anyone know why that's a bad place to hit them?' He waited, managers glancing at each other. He explained, 'Those bridges bend with the wind, they were designed that way.'

'Of course!' Beesely said. 'They're flexible in the middle.'

Johnno nodded. 'I'd have put the bombs inside one of the supports, at the bottom, or somewhere solid. This ... *bomber* has no idea about the mechanics of explosions – so he didn't learn his trade in the military.'

'These are the devices used in Switzerland,' a manager explained as he handed Johnno a black and white A4 photo.

Johnno studied it, a smile forming.

'Something?' Beesely asked.

Johnno made eye contact with Beesely, a glint in his eye. 'This guy is either a genius, having a laugh, or a complete twat. I think we know which.'

‘Why?’ Beesely asked.

‘It’s a purely mechanical device. No matter what you do to this thing, the only way you’re going to get yourself killed is if you wait for it to go off. You can turn the timer back, turn it off, pull out the batteries, unplug or cut the frigging wires or pull the detonators from the plastic explosive. Any one of those would do.’

‘So the bomber was not planning on anyone finding them,’ Beesely mused.

‘Either that ... or coming back to what I said earlier, a complete twat.’ He lifted his phone. ‘Send down Mavo and Blinkey.’

‘Yes, sir.’

They waited as drinks were brought in. The two troopers, dressed in their black fatigues and webbing, wandered in, moving around to Johnno when he waved them over.

Johnno held up the photo. ‘What ya reckon to that?’

They studied the photo. ‘It’s a training aid,’ Mavo suggested. Blinkey agreed.

‘Training aid?’ Beesely repeated, a crease forming across his brow.

‘What they use in week one at bomb disposal school,’ Mavo explained. ‘Start simple, then add layers of difficulty to it. They usually stick a detonator in a bag of floor or soot and rig it to go off no matter what - scare the new recruits.’

‘British?’ Beesely asked.

Mavo and Blinkey nodded their agreement in unison.

‘I haven’t seen these used anywhere else,’ Johnno commented.

‘So our car bomber – twat or not – is British Army trained,’ Beesely considered, sitting back.

Johnno reached across and grabbed the second desk phone. ‘This is Johnno, get me Dame Helen.’

They waited, sipping their drinks.

‘Hello?’ came Helen’s dry voice.

‘Helen, Johnno. Got a second?’

‘Yes, anything new?’

‘Got a paper and pen?’

‘Go ahead.’

‘I want a list of all UK military personal who have attended bomb disposal classes in the last ... ten or fifteen years, but no-one who completed the courses. Remove the SAS and SBS, unless they were kicked out early on ... remove those still serving, remove those with a good job, wife and kids, then cross match to any recent foreign travel.’

‘Why is this going to worry me?’ she asked.

‘Home grown, Helen,’ Beesely put in.

‘Christ, the papers will love that!’ she commented.

Beesely eased towards the phone. ‘Make this your top priority, Helen, he may have something more than just firecrackers up his sleeve.’

‘We’ve cancelled London today. Everything. Absolute chaos.’

‘Get back to me with that list,’ Johnno loudly requested, cutting her off. He eased back, looking at his notes.

Mavo tapped his shoulder. ‘Who was that twat that Pete clobbered?’

Johnno stared out of focus, a studious expression taking hold. ‘Oh ... yeah, I remember his court-martial. Navy officer, tried to get into the SBS three times. Complete tosser. Pete smacked him out at some naval base.’ He faced the floor, thinking hard.

Otto stood up, pressed the desk phone CALL button and said, ‘Put me through to the ex-SAS trooper named Peter Wilson.’

Everyone focused on Otto.

‘Hello?’ came an English accent a few seconds. ‘Pete here.’

‘Peter, it is Otto.’

‘Hello Mister Otto.’

‘Peter, do you remember any details of a Navy officer you apparently punched ... the man being court-martialled.’

‘Hell, yes. Mountney, Mark Mountney.’

‘That’s the twat!’ Johno coughed out.

‘Hey Johno!’ Pete called.

‘What else do you know?’ Otto asked.

‘He lived in Portsmouth, wife and two kids. He’d be ... about forty-eight now.’

‘Thank you.’ Otto cut the line and re-dialled. ‘Dame Helen, please.’ He sat back down.

‘Beesely?’

Beesely inched closed to the phone. ‘Helen, check out a Mark Mountney, Naval Officer, probably former, Portsmouth, wife and two kids. We’ll hold.’ He eased back and lifted his tea.

Thirty seconds later she came back with, ‘He’s wanted, assaulted his ex-wife a few months back, got himself flagged on a visit to Georgia and Ukraine –’

‘He’s our man!’ Beesely shouted. ‘All resources Helen.’ He cut the line.

Otto pointed at two managers, who bolted out. ‘We will cross-match every travel database.’

Johno pointed at a manager. ‘Let the French know he’s the main suspect for the Paris bomb, same with the Germans, BKA.’

The manager lifted his phone and stepped out.

‘Good work, Johno,’ Beesely commended.

Johno lifted his head to Mavo. ‘Is your name Johno as well now?’

‘Good work from you two as well,’ Beesely offered, a mildly scolding look for Johno. The two troopers smiled, nodded respectfully and went back to their duties. ‘So, some progress,’ Beesely noted, addressing no one in particular.

‘But how did he connect with Luchenkov?’ Otto asked. ‘I am surprised that Luchenkov would trust a British man, especially a former Naval officer.’

‘Mountney’s trip to Georgia,’ Johno suggested, doodling on his pad. ‘Must have got involved with some drugs or guns when the missus finally kicked him out.’

A manager took a call, his expression catching all their attention. ‘Sir,’ he began, addressing Beesely. ‘A mix-up at the hospital. The morgue reports that one of the attackers, from the lorry that launched the missile, is alive.’

‘Top priority - torture the bastard! Find out what he knows,’ Beesely firmly ordered.

The manager replied to the caller, several quick sentences.

‘Second lucky break,’ Johno muttered. He lifted his head to Beesely. ‘Oh, you know the Swiss Army is here?’ Beesely nodded, sipping his tea. ‘Cannon fodder,’ Johno quietly added.

Otto seemed to object to that phrase. ‘They are well trained, and well disciplined.’

‘Which counts for jack shit,’ Johno suggested, a cold stare for Otto. ‘Shiny boots don’t make a good soldier! Combat experience ... makes a good soldier.’

‘They’re here to help –’ Beesely began.

‘I don’t want them here tonight,’ Johno spat out. ‘They’ll get themselves hurt.’

‘They are our best soldiers,’ Otto insisted, getting louder.

‘Who’ve never fired a shot in anger!’ Johno snapped back.

Beesely raised his hands. ‘Gentlemen ... they have kindly offered to assist –’

‘So stick them up the road a mile on the roadblocks,’ Johno suggested. ‘We’ve got enough blood on our hands’

Beesely offered him a soothing expression and gentle, flat palm. He left his gaze on Johno till Johno wet back to his doodling. Turning to Otto he said, ‘Let’s not repeat this debate. Johno is ... rightly concerned for all Swiss lives. But our guards are better trained, and they know what they signed up for. Most have had more combat experience than

those soldiers outside... put together.' Otto lowered his gaze. Beesely faced the managers. 'Gentlemen, take fifteen minutes, please.'

The remaining managers filed out. Beesely faced Otto. 'Otto, I am glad to see that Johnno is more interested, these days, in saving lives – than taking them. He's always been a bit blood thirsty, so it must be old age. Either that, or *you*... are having a good effect on him.'

Otto could not help but smile.

'Or maybe,' Johnno began, still doodling, 'I'm having a bad effect on *him*, and he's getting blood thirsty.'

'Let's hope not,' Beesely suggested, finishing his tea.

Simon, the senior guard walked in. He stopped, took a big breath and let it out slowly, getting their attention; three quizzical looks. He said, 'The missile that hit the cliff caused a crack –'

Beesely jumped up. 'Christ! There's no danger of a cave in, is there?'

Simon shook his head. 'No, sir, I don't think so. This crack is in the tank room, on the far right at the back.'

'How big?' Otto asked.

Simon smiled. 'Big enough to shine a torch in a see that it's a large cavern with equipment in.'

Johnno jumped up. 'Shit ...' he quietly let out.

'Another room?' Beesely asked no one in particular.

'Do we have any cave experts?' Simon asked with a coy smile.

'No!' Beesely and Otto said at the same time, glancing at Johnno.

Johnno smiled to himself and walked out, pushing Simon before him.

'If he gets stuck ...' Beesely began.

'I'll hold him, you shoot him,' Otto sullenly suggested.

Johno lifted a torch and peered inside the large crack. 'Simon, Geiger counter, please,' he quietly requested.

Suddenly mortified, Simon sent a guard running to the command centre; down the access ramp, out and around the castle and drawbridge and then inside. It took a long five minutes, Johno pacing up and down and smoking, carefully observed by an anxious group of guards.

Finally the man arrived back, panting strongly. Simon turned on the Geiger counter and swung it around the cavernous tank room. All clear. He thrust it through the hole, causing a high-pitched squeal.

'Everyone out!' Simon shouted, shepherding the guards down the ramp.

Johno ambled down, finishing his cigarette. In the cool air he lifted his phone and dialled the numeric combination that put him through to everyone. 'Emergency! All non-essential personal to evacuate. I repeat, all non-essential personal to evacuate, radiation protocols.'

Guards started running in several directions, Johno picking up the pace and escorting Simon back around the castle and into the courtyard, an alarm sounding. At the command centre entrance he met Otto and Beesely, Otto now swinging around a Geiger counter – as were a dozen other staff.

'What's in there?' Beesely asked, a concerned look.

'Remember those nukes that Dame Helen thought Gunter pinched?'

'They're not?' Beesely gasped, exchanging a stunned look with Otto.

'Let's just hope shaking them up didn't start any countdown,' Johno muttered.

Beesely led them back to his desk. He jabbed a button as he sat. 'Oliver Stanton, please.'

'Beesely?' came a sleepy whisper some ten seconds later.

'Olly, you awake?'

‘I just this bloody minute put my head back down,’ Stanton croaked. ‘It’s 3am here. What’s happened now?’

‘Remember that pair of nukes that Dame Helen warned us about?’

‘Yes ...?’

‘There here, about twenty yards from where I normally plonk my backside down.’

‘Jesus...’

‘Could we borrow Mr. Grey and that team?’

‘He’s on holiday ... er ... Malta of all places. Scuba diving off some island –’

‘Gozo,’ Johnno put in, remembering his last conversation with Mr. Grey.

‘Yeah, that’s it. Which, strangely enough, is only about thirty miles from where those nukes were supposed to have been fished up from.’

‘Symmetry, eh?’ Johnno muttered.

‘Make the call, Olly, then off to bed,’ Beesely firmly nudged.

‘You’re gunna be popular.’ They could hear a sigh. ‘Give me ten.’ The line went dead.

Beesely rubbed his face, causing Johnno to sit up.

‘You look rough,’ Johnno commented, a concerned tone.

‘Feel it,’ Beesely muttered.

‘You want the doctor?’ Otto asked, closing in.

‘No,’ Beesely sighed. ‘It’s all the excitement, that’s all.’

‘This place would tax a man a quarter of your age,’ Johnno suggested. ‘So take it easy.’

‘You’re supposed to say ... a man *half* my age.’

‘I know what I meant,’ Johnno said with a cheeky grin. ‘Now, you take it easy, old fucker, we can handle this.’

Otto faced Johnno, straightening. ‘I can honestly say we are *experienced* ... in such matters, caves with radiation.’

Without looking up Beesely said, ‘See if there’s a private jet that can get Mr. Grey, or send ours.’ He faced Johnno, his head still low. ‘Malta? Flight time in a Learjet?’

‘Fuck all. Hour.’

The alarm stopped.

Beesely pressed a button on the desk phone. ‘Any radiation reported?’

‘No, sir, just the ‘tank’ room.’

‘Thank you.’ He eased back. ‘So, I guess that the cavern is now officially called the ‘tank’ room.’ He took a slow, audible breath. ‘Blast radius of the nukes?’

‘Don’t worry, after all this time they won’t work,’ Johnno confidently suggested.

Beesely made eye contact. ‘Sure?’

‘Sure,’ Johnno offered with a warm smile. ‘Relax. And if they did go ‘pop’ the town would be fine. *We’d* ... be toast, but the town would be OK.’

‘Johnno, your bedside manner needs work.’

* * *

Mr. Grey glanced at his dive computer, a grey Mares computer attached to his wrist. This was a shallow dive, no risk of nitrogen narcosis, but drills were drills and he checked his computer and air gauge every five minutes. At sixteen metres depth, just off the north coast of Comino Island, he noted 47minutes dive time, 100bar tank pressure remaining.

Ahead he could see a dark shadow from where from the sun fell behind the cliff above them, the mouth of the semi-enclosed cave his group had dived in earlier now visible. His ‘dive buddy’ swam a few metres ahead, pointing at a sea snake as it headed towards the surface for a gulp of air.

Grey suddenly became aware of another shadow with a professional interest. Easing his head up he could see a dark shadow over the water. A helicopter.

A burst of white water and bubbles signalled the entry of a rescue diver wearing an orange wetsuit. The diver, holding his mask, righted himself, surfaced, took a breath through

his snorkel and then duck-dived down, taking several graceful swim-strokes before kicking with his fins, his arms now by his side. Holding his nose and clearing his ears he swam quickly down to ten metres and levelled off, signalling the dive group to surface.

Figuring that this was probably more about him – than the British and Belgian amateur divers - Grey finned quickly towards the man, extending his yellow emergency regulator towards the diver. The gap closed quickly, the diver accepting the regulator, blowing out water and then breathing in as they both started to slowly ascend, gripping each other's forearms.

The rescuer diver drew a name in the water. G ... R ... E ... Y. Mr. Grey pointed towards himself and then gave the 'OK' dive signal. They accelerated their ascent, Mr. Grey's wrist computer bleeping its complaint as a safe ascent rate was exceeded.

At the surface the rescuer diver held up his thumb for the winch-man to see all was well. Grey checked below and then dropped his weight-belt, using the 'quick-release' buckles on his jacket to detach himself from the tank.

A few seconds later he sat on the side of the American made Maltese rescue helicopter, pulling off his fins and discarding them, letting them fall into the ocean as the helicopter sped low over the water, his mask similarly discarded, the door finally closed.

The winch-man placed his mouth next to Grey's ear. 'You must go to Switzerland, urgent!' he shouted over the aircraft noise.

Grey nodded, none too phased, sitting on a bench and accepting a towel.

The olive-skinned Maltese diver pointed out the window and smiled, Grey following his gaze. 'American. Pop-eye village. They made the film here!'

Grey forced a quick smile and nodded, a glimpse at the wooden village made for the film, nestled into the base of a

small cliff. He had dived from the nearby concrete jetty just the day before.

* * *

Thirty minutes later Johnno walked back into Beesely's office with Thomas, the boy holding a large box of doughnuts. They both slumped into chairs. Beesely opened his eyes and eased forwards, Otto entering a second later with a fresh tea for Beesely.

Johnno informed them, 'Grey's on a plane, private jet of some sort, apparently faster than our Learjet. Be here in no time.'

'Good, good,' Beesely offered, sipping his tea.

A manager walked in as Otto sat. 'Sir, some news from the prisoner.'

'Prisoner?' Beesely repeated, squinting up at the man.

'Russian man, captured at the lorry with the missile launcher.'

'Ah, yes. Did he talk?'

'Yes, sir, some words. Luchenkov on a yacht —'

'We know that,' Johnno scoffed, a mouth full of doughnut.

The manager added, 'And something about a boat on a river full of explosives.'

'Fuck!' Johnno said as he jumped up, spraying his doughnut. He jabbed at the phone as he tried to chew and swallow. 'Get Dame Helen!' he shouted.

Beesely faced the manager. 'Which river?'

'Unknown, sir.'

'There's only one — the Thames,' Johnno insisted. 'Large boats can't get near Paris or Berlin ... or here.'

'Yes,' Beesely agreed with an urgent nod.

'Hello? Beesely?' came Helen's voice.

Johno closed in. ‘Helen! Condition Black! Boat on the river packed with explosives. Look out the window, what’s the tide?’ They waited.

‘It’ll be high tide in half an hour,’ she shouted.

‘Get on it, Helen,’ Johno shouted. ‘Target is probably Parliament!’

She cut the line, a deathly silence of anticipation capturing the room.

Otto slowly stood, looking terrified. ‘What if we are too late?’

Beesely rubbed his chest, the movement unnoticed.

‘Boats can go up the Thames before high tide,’ Johno pointed out, slumping back down and glancing at a concerned Thomas.

They sipped their teas for several silent, tortured minutes.

‘Sir!’ burst from the phone. ‘Reports of a huge explosion in England, thousands hurt...’

End of an era

1

‘Johno?’ Beesely quietly called, his words unheard as Otto ran out.

Johno stood kicking a cabinet and screaming. Thomas stood now also, confused and terrified – and feeling useless.

‘Johno?’ Beesely called again, no energy in his voice.

Thomas noticed. ‘Johno, Beesely wants you!’

Johno turned around. ‘What?’ he loudly snapped.

‘I can’t ... feel ... my left arm.’

Johno took big strides and closed the distance quickly, shoving Thomas towards the door. ‘Doctor.’ As Thomas ran out Johno opened a cabinet, pulling out a large green first aid kit, his private assemblage. Opening it onto the desk he grabbed a packet of powdered Anadin concentrate and poured it into Otto’s unfinished orange juice, quickly stirring it with a finger. ‘All of it,’ he firmly whispered, holding the glass to Beesely’s mouth and tipping his head back.

Beesely finished it all, coughing. Johno retrieved a water bottle from the fridge and forced Beesely to take numerous swigs, Otto rushing in with the doctor.

‘Heart attack,’ Johno calmly informed the doctor. He stepped back as the medic closed in, opening a yellow plastic pack and immediately attaching a defibrillator to Beesely’s chest. Johno tapped the desk phone and asked for an ambulance as the machine started to audibly signal Beesely’s weak heartbeat.

As they watched, Beesely involuntarily exhaled, closed his eyes and slumped backwards, the machine’s electronic replica of his heartbeat the only sign that he remained alive. Johno put the Anadin pack wrapper down the inside of Beesely’s shirt, alerting the hospital doctors as to what he had given him.

‘He is stable for the moment,’ the doctor calmly announced. ‘But there may be damage.’

Otto pressed the desk phone. ‘Beesely is down. I repeat, Beesely is down. Observe protocols.’

Johno glanced at the phone, no clue as to what that meant, placing a hand on Thomas’s shoulder as a stretcher wheeled in. The medics carefully eased Beesely over, the reassuring bleeps echoing from the defibrillator. Fortunately, the courtyard had still been full of ambulances and their crews. With Beesely strapped in they carefully wheeled him out, everyone in the command centre stopping and looking up.

In the great hall Johno stopped Otto, a hand on his arm. ‘You need to stay here, let Thomas go.’

Otto seemed stunned by the suggestion, pulling his arm free and walking on, Johno catching up a second later. ‘I must go with him.’

‘If there’s another attack ... we need you here!’

‘He need’s me,’ Otto insisted, quickening his pace.

‘We need you here!’ Johno insisted, getting louder and catching the attention of many people.

Otto stopped. In a strong whisper he growled, ‘To hell with ... *here!* Beesely needs me!’ He rushed after the stretcher.

Johno stopped dead, Thomas looking up – not knowing what to do; tearful, concerned and now confused. ‘Go with grandpa,’ Johno finally whispered, the boy sprinting after Otto as the ambulance manoeuvred. He turned and walked back inside.

* * *

Stanton cursed his mobile then opened the text message. ‘BEESELY IS DOWN.’ He lowered the phone and glanced at his wife as she made him coffee in their kitchen, both now stood in dressing gowns.

‘What is it?’ she asked, noticing his look.

He sighed. ‘Beesely is down.’ He glanced at a calendar stuck to his fridge door. ‘The end of an era.’

They stared at each other.

* * *

Dame Helen ignored her mobile phone as she screamed down her landline at the Police Commissioner. Willis lifted it, opening the text message. He closed the phone and placed it down as reports of the explosion began on Sky News. She slammed the phone down and approached the TV screens, a hand over her mouth.

Willis stepped up to her, Helen noticing his look. ‘Beesely is down,’ he quietly informed her. ‘Guess that means he’s dead.’

She closed her eyes.

* * *

Susan was busy, all London officers recalled, her office buzzing. She felt the vibration in her pocket, then eased the phone out – awkwardly past her bullet-proof vest – and read the message, slumping into a chair.

* * *

Elle Rosen lowered his phone and turned back to the TV screen, shaking his head.

2

Johno stood just inside Beesely’s empty office, staring at Beesely’s chair. The office suddenly felt a lot bigger. From the fridge he fixed himself a ‘Vodka Red Bull’, slumping

down heavily into his usual seat. With his eyes closed he gently massaged the bridge of his nose.

Someone sat next to him, letting out a loud sigh. Johnno opened one eye for just a fraction of a second: Simon, the senior guard commander.

‘Hard day at the office?’ Johnno asked in a whisper, taking a large swig with his eyes still closed.

‘The day is only just starting,’ Simon quietly pointed out, easing back and stretching out his legs.

‘How you coping?’

Simon turned his head. ‘How are *you* ... coping, Boss?’

‘Same as ever, hurts all over.’

Simon nodded, unseen by Johnno. ‘Will Herr Beesely survive?’

‘Doubt it,’ Johnno whispered. ‘At that age ... tricky.’

Again Simon nodded. ‘What are you drinking?’

‘Vodka Red Bull,’ Johnno answered, barely above a whisper. ‘Vodka takes the edge off, Red Bull keeps me going.’

‘How long since you slept?’

‘Dunno, it’s all a bit foggy.’ He took another swig.

Claus, the senior manager walked in with a file. ‘Johnno? Are you OK?’

Johnno let out a long, loud breath and lifted his head. ‘Sure. What do you need?’

‘Your attention for a few minutes,’ Claus answered. He opened his file then stiffened. ‘By the power invested in me by the owners and directors of the International Bank of Zurich –’ Johnno shot him a quizzical look. ‘- I hereby activate Herr Beesely’s Incapacity Will, 9.30am, Wednesday the 22nd of August.’

Johnno exchanged a look with Simon, who now appeared just as confused.

Claus continued, ‘In accordance with that will, ownership of the banking group now passes to you in its entirety –’

‘Whoaa there, tiger,’ Johno said, raising a hand towards Claus and sitting up. ‘You what?’

‘When Herr Beesely became incapacitated you inherited the bank ... as his son and nominated heir.’

‘Son?’ Simon asked. ‘That explains a lot.’

‘What ... what about Otto?’ Johno asked.

‘Within the Incapacity Will there are several provisions, including the fact that Otto stays on as Deputy Group Director until such time as the new owner - that’s you - appoints or changes the positions of the staff, which will then be legally recorded and witnessed.

‘There are also other provisions in the will. First, you cannot sell the bank for ten years from this date, you cannot draw down from the bank more than 25% of your personal worth and the main activities of the banking group cannot be changed within ten years. There are twenty-two other provisions of a minor nature.’

‘Jesus,’ Johno let out, a stunned look for Simon, but not at the numerous sub-provisions.

‘You’re the boss now,’ Simon stated.

Johno stood. ‘Simon, leave us, please.’

Simon eased up and walked out, closing the door.

‘What about Otto?’ Johno asked in a whisper, closing in on Claus.

Claus glanced over his shoulder towards the door. ‘Otto ... *is not* ... Herr Beesely’s son. Nor can he ever be known to be.’

Johno slowly nodded to himself before noticing Claus gesturing towards Beesely’s chair.

‘Yours now,’ Claus informed him.

Johno studied ‘the chair’, taking a big mouthful of his drink. ‘What happens if Beesely recovers?’

‘You still retain ownership. What you do with it is up to you. If you wish you can appoint Herr Beesely as Group Director when he is well enough ... if he is well enough, of

course.’ Claus straightened, clasping his hands behind his back. ‘The group awaits you instructions, Herr Director.’

Johnno’s eyes narrowed, focusing on Claus. ‘Then here’s my first fucking instruction – don’t call me frigging Herr Director. Johnno will do.’

‘As you see fit, sir.’

Staring out of focus Johnno took a deep breath and finished his drink. ‘Best try and win this war then, before the old man gets back all grumpy.’ He gently lowered himself into Beesely’s chair. ‘All managers, deputies and guard commanders. Please.’

Claus picked up his file, turning on a heel and leaving

Johnno sat in the big chair, rubbing his hands across the desk. ‘Hope I don’t let you down, old fucker,’ he whispered.

Five minutes later the managers and deputies sat assembled, guard commanders arriving last – Johnno sat silently watching them arrive. Most smiled welcomingly at him as they entered.

‘Leave the door open,’ Johnno said as the last guard commander arrived. Scanning the assembled group he took in their faces. ‘As most of you already know, Beesely has had a heart attack ... and is on his way to hospital. He may survive, he may not. His ... *condition* has activated something called an Incapacity Will, which transfers power to me ... until Beesely sees what I’m doing with the place and comes running back.’ Everyone smiled, reserved and politely. ‘Let’s try and have this place sorted for him when he gets back, eh?’

He touched his throbbing ear. ‘OK, first, dead and wounded figures?’

Claus eased forwards. ‘Thirty-eight confirmed dead, eight missing, five critical, forty-five seriously wounded, thirty-seven wounded. We are not counting staff who are injured but remain at work.’

Johnno rubbed his forehead. ‘How many Brit’s did we lose?’

‘Six confirmed dead, sir,’ Claus answered. ‘One critical, three injured.’

Johno considered the losses, glancing at the guard commanders. ‘How many ex-SAS applicants on the waiting list?’

‘Twenty-two,’ a manager answered. ‘Plus eight SBS, twenty five Marines and thirty from your Parachute Regiment.’

Johno tapped the desk idly with a finger. ‘How many have been vetted?’

‘Most, sir,’ the same manager answered. ‘But not yet the gentlemen with Herr Bilbo, sir.’

‘I’ll vouch for *them*,’ Johno said. ‘Besides, they’re already frigging here. Someplace.’ He rubbed his nose, sore from where he had landed on it earlier. ‘OK, transfer them all to Switzerland – to the training base, usual checks, medicals, briefings. I want twenty of the best ready for the weekend.’

Managers took notes.

‘Right, has everything been done to assist the wounded?’ Managers nodded. ‘The families of the deceased?’

‘The local police are helping, plus people we have brought in from other areas,’ Claus explained. ‘One male and one female officer go out with one of our staff to visit the family. Several had no families.’

Johno consider that fact for a moment. ‘Castle roof?’

A manager stated, ‘They are throwing the debris over the side as you requested, already good progress.’

‘All fires out?’ Johno asked the man.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Estimates for repair time?’

‘Could be a month, at least –’ a manager reported.

Johno exploded. ‘Like fuck! If it takes a month I’ll shoot the lot of you myself! I want round the clock builders, the best money can buy, hundreds of them. You *will* ... fix that restaurant back to as good as it was, and quickly.’

Managers nervously made notes.

Johno took in their faces for several seconds before easing back into his chair, letting out a big breath. 'OK, radiation?' he asked in a softer voice.

'Just the tank room,' Simon reported. 'Nothing seeping out, and we've blocked up the hole. Staff have returned.'

'Good,' Johno said with an approving nod.

'Mr. Grey will be here soon,' Simon added.

'US Army here in one hour, sir,' Claus stated.

Johno rubbed his face, picking off dried mud and blood. 'Latest from the UK?'

Claus reluctantly reported, a pained expression, 'Estimated one thousand dead, ten thousand wounded, sir.'

'Which part of London got hit?' Johno quietly asked.

'Not London, sir. Portsmouth.'

'Portsmouth!' Johno repeated, straightening. 'Not London?'

'No, sir. The Naval base at Portsmouth. A ship sailed up the Solent river and alongside a British ship ... name Ark-'

'Ark Royal?' Johno gasped.

'Yes, sir. It was destroyed, everyone killed.'

'Ark Royal sunk?' Johno asked in a strained whisper.

Claus offered a sympathetic nod.

Johno stared down at the desk, breathing hard. He closed his eyes. 'What else?'

'The blast broke windows up to three miles away, sir,' Claus unhappily reported. 'That is why so many casualties.'

'Herr Johno?' a lady manager called. 'We have the medics in a place named Swindon ...?'

Johno considered the woman's idea, taking in their expectant looks. 'Ladies and gentlemen, I know we're all hurting *here* ... and K2 has suffered greatly, but ten thousand wounded outnumbers what pain we're going through – by a long fucking way. I propose to assist the people of Portsmouth, diverting time, money and resources from here. Does anyone have any objections?'

He waited as managers glanced at each other.

Finally Simon said, 'We have everything here under control, Johno.'

Johno jabbed at the desk phone. 'Get me the head of our rescue force in the UK, urgent.'

'Yes, sir.'

They waited.

'Colonel Vaughan,' came a voice that Johno recognised.

'Vaughan? Regiment Vaughan?'

'Yes, that you Johno?'

'Yeah, what you doing there?'

'Quit the Army a few months back, heard about this. With my background they hired me on the spot ... been flat-out ever since, here ten days now. Got a dozen troopers here as well, some Regiment officers mucking in.'

'Listen! How many medics could you raise in five minutes?'

'There's two hundred and fifty warm bodies here. Why?'

'Why? Haven't you heard about Portsmouth?'

'Portsmouth? No, been busy. What's up?'

'You sitting down?'

'*Not any more.* What's up?'

'Some fucker sailed a boat into Portsmouth Naval base, couple a tonnes of high explosive –'

'What?' Vaughan shrieked.

'Ten thousand casualties.'

There was a long silence, voices in the background. 'Get the fucking news on!' could be heard. They waited. 'Johno, I can see the pictures on the tele' ... Jesus!'

'Vaughan, I'm now the head of K2, Beesely is ... ill. *I'm* your employer, so listen the fuck up, and listen good. I want you to hire, steal or borrow every helicopter you can... and get every medic we have straight to Portsmouth.' Johno pointed at a manager. 'We'll be sending you all K2 helicopters in the UK –' The manager sent his deputy out. '- plus every chopper we can hire.'

‘We got two Chinooks sat right here,’ Vaughan explained. ‘RAF.’

‘Grab them, at gun point if necessary ... I don’t care.’

‘There’s also a Hercules loading up with fifty para’s!’

‘Paras? You mean our medic civvy para’ unit?’

‘Yes. Today was to be the first practice drop, onto the sand near Studland Bay in Dorset.’

‘Divert them, they’ll be dropping on Portsmouth. Explain it nicely to the pilots, any which way, I don’t fucking care – just do it.’

‘I’m on the case. I’ll make some calls, rope in as many old boys as I can find. Jesus, there’s pictures on the tele’ of Ark Royal on her side, burning.’

‘I want thirty minute updates to Operations here. Johnno out.’ He cut the line. Facing the managers he said, ‘I want every chopper we can hire – anywhere in the UK – to be sent to them, or to Portsmouth to help out.’ He pressed a button. ‘Get me Blaum!’

A few seconds later came the deep and welcoming voice of Max Blaum. ‘Johnno?’

‘Max, listen up. Beesely is in hospital, I’m holding the fort. I want every Swiss Red Cross medic kitted out and ready to go in an hour, money is no object.’

‘What for?’

‘I want to send them to the UK, to Portsmouth.’

‘I have just been watching the news. Terrible.’

‘How many can you mobilise, Max?’

‘Six hundred, plus military reserves.’

‘Six hundred?’ Johnno repeated. ‘Way to go! We’ll organise the planes, you get the bodies. Oh, and land at Southampton airport, fuck the permission. Any comeback and we’ll sort it.’

‘I’ll get things moving and call you back.’ Blaum hung-up with a click, managers now dispatching several deputies.

Johnno rubbed the bridge of his nose again, his eyes closed. ‘That arsehole, Mountney, was from Portsmouth.’

He lifted his head. Quietly, he added, 'I guess he had some scores to settle with the in-laws and the local bookies.' He pressed a button. 'French Ambassador.'

A minute later came, 'Hello? Mister ... Johnno?'

'Yes. You seen the news?'

'I have. This is outrageous –'

'Shut up and listen. We gave you the paintings, now comes payback time. I want a plane load of French rescuers with dogs and thermal cameras, plus a plane load or two of medics – and I want them on their way to Southampton Airport within the hour, or I'm going to get annoyed.'

'Mister Johnno, just where - exactly - did you learn your diplomatic skills?'

'British SAS.'

'I can believe it. My government ... will help in any way it can – without bribes or threats.'

'Get a move on then.' Johnno cut the line and eased back as a mug of tea was placed down for him by Simon; Johnno did not even remember him leaving the room.

'Ta.' Johnno took a sip. 'Right, the hospitals around Portsmouth are going to get swamped. They can't handle a fucking flu outbreak, let alone something like this. They've probably got ten spare beds between them. How many spare hospital beds are there here, Austria and Germany ... in private clinics?'

'Thousands,' Claus suggested. 'But could we not transport them to other parts of England? Many will not wish to be away from their families when they are injured.'

'Good point. Let's hire a hundred coaches from around the south of England, send them to Portsmouth, then use them to ferry people around the UK.'

Managers took notes.

'Let's use the helicopters for the seriously wounded, fly them to the nearest hospital with spare beds. But how many seriously burnt people could we get into private clinics here?'

‘Five hundred, maybe,’ Claus suggested.

‘Make plans to fly them here when stable, free up beds in the UK. Re-hab’ for burns victims takes months, that’ll tie up lots of beds over there. Besides, the UK has fuck-all burns units anyway. Oh!’ He dialled. ‘Get me the director of BUPA in the UK.’ The tea was finished quickly. He faced Simon. ‘Fridge, Vodka Red Bull.’ Simon made the drink.

‘Hello?’ came an American accent.

‘Who’s that?’ Johnno asked, a slight puzzlement at the American accent.

‘This is Charles Dexter, the head of BUPA UK.’

‘Oh, right. I’m the Director of the International Bank of Zurich, Switzerland.’

‘How can I help?’ came the pleasant voice.

‘Have you seen what’s happened in Portsmouth?’

‘Yes, shocking, everyone talking about it ... not much work getting done, everyone glued to the radio.’

‘What they doing in on a Sunday?’ Johnno puzzled.

‘Er ... hospitals don’t close on weekends,’ Dexter explained, trying not to sound too patronising.

Johnno rolled his eyes. ‘OK, listen up. I am *personally* worth more than BUPA UK is worth ... and I am going to offer to pay for some of the seriously injured from Portsmouth to be treated in your hospitals. Is that OK with you?’

‘Er ... I’m not quite sure how we might organise such a thing.’

‘OK, let’s keep this simple. *I’ll go slow*. My bank is going to electronically transfer one hundred million pounds in the next hour—’

‘Did you say ... a hundred million pounds?’

‘I did, check it when it’s there. What I want you to do... is to use that money treating as many people as you can from Portsmouth, spreading them all over the UK at your nice shiny – MRSA free - hospitals. When that money runs out, pick up the blower and we’ll sort some more. Got it?’

‘Er ... I’ll have to chat to the board.’

‘Do so quickly, and no mention of where the money came from. You’ll see it in your account soon, then go to work.’ He hung up.

‘MRSA?’ Simon queried.

‘Most UK hospitals make you sicker coming out than when you went in,’ Johnno commented, sipping his drink. ‘What else can we do?’

‘The old people will suffer,’ a woman suggested. ‘Windows broken, gas and electric off ... everyone too busy to call on them.’

‘Sally Army!’ Johnno said, pointing at the woman.

‘Who?’ the manager asked.

‘British Salvation Army. Bunch of anoraks and do-gooders, soup-kitchens.’

‘Ah, I see,’ the woman acknowledged, taking notes.

‘Hire buses ... transport them from other areas, as many as can be mobilised. And talking of windows, I want every glass-repair company for a hundred miles sent a small amount of money and then sent to Portsmouth.’

‘Tonight will be a problem,’ Claus suggested.

‘Here?’ Johnno asked.

‘No, in England. No gas or electric for many houses.’

‘Soup kitchens! See who we can hire ... concert catering companies. If they can feed the Glastonbury Festival, they can feed Portsmouth. And those fuckers doing the catering at Hyde Park are out of a job, so try them.’

‘OK, guard commanders remain, rest to work – back here in one hour.’ Quietly, he added, ‘Someone remind me when it’s time.’

‘Sir?’ came from the phone.

‘Yes?’ Johnno answered as the managers filed out.

‘Mister Grey just landed at the airfield. Naked, sir.’

Johnno blinked at the phone. ‘Naked?’

‘He was apparently winched from the sea, in scuba gear, and flown directly here.’

Johno smirked towards Simon. 'Best sort him some clothes for when he gets here. Ta, love.'

'Naked?' Simon repeated.

Johno shrugged. 'He's gunna be pissed with us. Didn't just cut his holiday in half, we fished him up as well ... mid scuba-dive by the sounds of it.'

* * *

Pepi waited for three men ranged in front of him to vent their anger, his head lowered respectfully. Finally they were done, storming out of this Strasbourg Freemason's Lodge. He faced his assistant, slowly unwrapping a fresh cigar. 'Exactly what happened at Zug?'

'The cruise missile hit the mountain, not the castle, but still with a great deal of damage and dead. Both planes were shot down, one landing inside the compound and killing many.'

Pepi cut the end of his cigar. 'Tally?'

'Fifty reported dead, at least one hundred wounded. But reported to the Swiss Government – a quarter of that!'

Pepi lit up, stepping to the large Masonic emblem fixed to the wall. 'The car bombs?' he enquired, without looking around.

'One one went off in Switzerland, the rest dealt with by K2 staff, apparently all English bomb disposal experts.'

Pepi glanced over his shoulder at that, before turning back to the wall.

'The bombs in England detonated, but caused little damage, no loss of life, sir.'

'Except the ship,' Pepi muttered

The assistant sighed. 'In addition to the explosives loaded in France, and unknown to us, Luchenkov packed in thirty tonnes of fertilizer, petrol, oil...'

'And now everyone in Europe will be against those responsible,' Pepi noted. 'Because of the loss of life ... not

just the planned damage to a naval ship - which should have been empty of most of its crew on a Sunday morning.'

'And the British Government may act...'

'The trail ends with Luchenkov,' Pepi confidently suggested, although he had his doubts, kept from his assistant.

3

The Hampshire Police helicopter hovered at five hundred feet, trying in vain to help co-ordinate the rescue attempts with ground units that could not get anywhere near the naval base. At best, the crew aboard their German made BO105 helicopter could just relay what they saw.

What they now saw from their position above Whale Island, Portsmouth Harbour, was a flotilla of fire-boats pumping water onto the Ark Royal, a plume of smoke drifting across the water in today's gentle breeze. From within the naval base a larger fire burnt, a thick black pall of smoke reaching up several thousand feet already, a stark reminder of what had happened on this otherwise pleasant and sunny August day.

The observer glanced left out of his window. With a casual professionalism he reported. 'Traffic, nine o'clock low. Police helicopter.'

The pilot scanned the western horizon, across the harbour. A small fire burnt in his two o'clock position, flashing blue lights nearby.

'What's that?' the observed called. 'Dead ahead?'

The pilot focused ahead through his sun visor. 'Looks like ... a Hercules. Jesus, he's low.'

'Coming right towards us,' the observed noted. 'Maybe... two hundred feet higher.'

'What the hell they doing on that course?' the pilot asked, as much of himself as his observer.

‘His flaps are down,’ the observer noted, a heavy frown and a glance at the pilot.

‘There’re no airfields for miles ... so what the hell is he on approach to?’ he pilot asked.

‘What the fuck ...?’ the observed began, but could not finish, as paratroopers emerged from either side of the Hercules. ‘Paras!’

They observed the scene as parachutes opened over Southsea Common, large white parachutes with red crosses patterned into the middle. They glanced at each other. The Hercules banked hard to the west, turning in a tight circle little more than six hundred yards from the police helicopter. Two ‘sticks’ of eight white parachutes drifted down and out of sight.

‘Mike Romeo two-six to base,’ the pilot transmitted.

‘Mike Romeo two-six, go ahead,’ came back, a professional and detached female voice.

‘Mike Romeo two-six, there’s a Royal Air Force Hercules transport dropping paratroopers ... on Southsea Common, over.’

The response was not immediate. ‘Mike Romeo two-six, say again.’

‘Mike Romeo two-six. There are paratroopers landing on Southsea Common, white parachutes with large red crosses on them!’

‘There,’ the observer pointed. ‘Two o’clock. Chinooks.’

As they observed, two Chinooks flew low across the harbour and landed promptly on the parade ground of the Naval College. With their rotors still turning dozens of people in white uniforms exited the rear of the helicopters and spread out. ‘They must be military,’ the observed puzzled.

‘Why they in white?’

The Chinooks were airborne a minute later, heading north over the harbour.

‘Shit!’ the observer let out. ‘Eight o’clock low! Where the hell did they come from?’

The pilot manipulated the left pedal and swung the helicopter around, now viewing nine civilian helicopters approaching in a line. The line of helicopters banked west and out over the harbour at little more than two hundred feet, swung around and then landed in a line on the parade ground.

WPC Stokes held her mobile phone a few inches from her face, looking up in awe as sixteen white parachutes drifted down right in front of her. The woman she had been helping became momentarily distracted from the injuries she had sustained after being blown off her feet.

Together, they keenly observed the first parachutist land softly in the flowerbeds just a few yards away. Two men, stood on the grass with their tops off, rushed forwards and grabbed the parachute as the parachutist got upright and released shoulder clips, the parachute falling at the feet of the two helpers. With her helmet off the medic shook her hair and jogged towards the policewoman, rapidly unclipping her reserve chute, clipped across her chest, finally detaching her medical kit.

‘I’m a doctor,’ she informed the policewoman, pushing her away from the injured woman. ‘Go and do something more useful.’

The doctor quickly checked the injured woman. ‘You’re fine, nothing serious.’ Then louder, ‘Listen! You’re fine, don’t go to hospital or tie-up and medics, you hear me. There are thousands of casualties here ... and most are serious. You’ll be fine.’ She turned and ran towards the sea-front castle and beyond to the centre of the explosion, her colleagues following.

With the policewoman watching, the ‘patient’ limped off towards her home.

Dame Helen sat glued to the TV news, little more she could do. MI6 was not a real-time operation; their jobs were stealthy intelligence gathering over time, and from outside of the UK. Now, there remained little they could do other than assist in the hunt for Mountney around Europe and the world.

Willis pointed at the screen. 'Who the hell are they?'

Dame Helen eased up, stepping closer to the screens as images of the Hercules releasing its paratroops filled every news service they were now monitoring. When the chutes opened she said, 'Beesely.'

'Beesely?' Willis queried, facing her. 'Oh! The rescue force in Swindon.' He faced the screen. 'He's dropping them right on the front at Southsea!'

'He's not,' Helen quietly stated. Willis faced her, a questioning look. She added, as she sat back down, 'He had a heart attack a few hours ago. Otto must have arranged it.'

'Christ!' Willis let out in a whisper. 'You think ... maybe... the shock of all this, coming right after his place was attacked?'

Without taking her eyes off the screen she quietly said, 'He's eighty. And they lost fifty people overnight, two hundred wounded.' She closed her eyes for a moment, her head in her hand.

'You OK? You want a water?'

'I won't survive this,' she whispered.

Willis frowned, unseen, then stared wide-eyed. Turning back to the TV screens he said, 'You think the PM will call for your resignation?'

'Without a doubt.'

‘Johno?’ a guard called, his words echoing across the tank room.

Johno stubbed out his cigarette and walked towards the enlarged crack in the tank room wall.

In his orange protective suit Mr. Grey eased his head out. Distorted by the suit he said, ‘You fucking knob head!’

Johno glanced at Simon. ‘What?’

‘The nukes aren’t here, jerk-off!’

‘They’re not?’ Johno questioned. ‘What about the radiation?’

Grey eased out and straightened, helped by a guard. ‘It’s just the casings, not the bombs!’

‘They radioactive?’ Johno asked.

‘Hell, yes. But nothing inside.’

‘What about the rest of the cave?’ Simon asked.

‘Fucking massive, goes back a mile!’ Grey reported through his suit.

‘Is there a radiation trail?’ Johno asked, helping Grey ease his suit off.

‘No,’ Grey answered, his head now free. ‘There’s part of a crumbling wall after the casings, then a very long tunnel. Old. Old chiselled tunnel.’

‘Old ... like the Czech cave?’ Johno nudged.

‘Much older. Maybe turn of the century or before ... old lamps.’

As Grey eased out of his suit Johno pointed at the crack. ‘How do we ... you know, deal with the casings?’

Breathing loudly in the cooler air Grey said, ‘Push them to the side then concrete them. There’s a hole they could be shoved into. Lead line it, then concrete the casings, then concrete all over. Twelve inches of concrete will do it.’

‘Get yourself some food and drink, rest if you need it,’ Johno suggested. ‘Then we got a cave for you to explore when the team gets here.’

‘Team?’ Grey carefully mouthed.

‘US decon’ team from Germany,’ Johno said. ‘Probably the same Captain.’

Grey offered Johno an unfriendly stare. ‘Was *he* ... on holiday?’

Jhono offered Grey two sympathetic flat hands. ‘You’ll be compensated -’

‘I’m not allowed to be compensated, asshole!’ Grey barked, handing Johno an old set of keys.

‘Really? Well that’s not fair.’ Johno faced Simon, idling with the rusty old keys. ‘Is it?’

‘Not fair at all,’ Simon sarcastically offered, he and Johno shaking their heads in less-than-sincere movements.

Grey pushed past. ‘I’ll start on the cave when the guys get here.’ His voice trailed off as he left them.

Jhono lifted the keys and inspected them. He yelped, throwing them down. ‘They’re fucking radioactive!’

‘No they’re not,’ came Grey’s voice from a distance, followed a laugh.

Simon scanned the keys with his Geiger counter. They were clean. He lifted them and examined them as Claus approached.

Jhono accepted the keys back, rubbing his thumb against the rusty fob, Claus now at his shoulder. ‘J ... C ... S.’

‘Let me see!’ Claus snapped, grabbing the keys. Observed by Johno and Simon, their interest piqued, Claus rubbed the key fob hard with his thumb. ‘JCS,’ he repeated, a horrified look. He faced Johno, a questioning look. ‘These... were inside? With the bombs?’

‘No bombs in there,’ Johno explained. ‘Relax.’

‘Not in there?’ Claus questioned.

‘Just the empty cases,’ Simon said. ‘You know these initials, sir?’

Claus made strong eye contact with Simon. ‘JCS - Johan Shue.’

Simon had been stood with his arms folded. Now he let his arms fall, a concerned look.

‘What?’ Johno asked.

Simon faced Johno. ‘Shue. He was a friend of Gunter’s, a collector of what you call *memorabilia*.’

Johno glanced from face to face. ‘Well ... if this fucker’s keys were next to the nukes, maybe he knows where they are?’

‘Maybe he has them,’ Simon suggested, clearly concerned.

Johno faced Claus. ‘This guy still alive?’

‘I believe so, perhaps eighty three now.’ He took a long breath, carefully observed by Johno. ‘This could be problem.’

‘Why?’ Johno queried.

‘He is a very rich man, who runs an organisation not unlike K2, but smaller.’

‘Like K2?’ Johno snapped. ‘Here, in Switzerland?’

‘In Austria, sir.’

‘How many men?’ Johno asked.

‘Perhaps twenty, thirty men,’ Claus explained.

Johno put a cigarette on his lip. ‘And what do they do?’

‘Herr Shue uses his ... *people* in finding and dealing with art treasures ... as well as rare items for collectors, many outlawed or dangerous. In fact I am sure that his footsteps were left in the dust in a certain Czech complex.’

Johno lit up. ‘What the fuck’s he doing risking everything by pissing about with our nukes?’

Claus straightened. ‘If he has them, or knows of their whereabouts, then ... then I am surprised that he would, as you say, take the risk. Anyone connected with such bombs would attract the interest of the Americans.’ Claus raised his eyebrows in emphasis. ‘And a strong interest.’

‘I want all we have on this guy on my - Beesely’s - desk today. Manager’s meeting in fifteen minutes.’ Johno faced Simon. ‘Get me Grey. Quickly.’

* * *

Johnno met Grey at the drawbridge, the American now wearing black guard clothing. 'Walk with me.'

Grey followed, Johnno stopping on the grass and lighting up. 'Problem?' Grey asked.

'Big problem,' Johnno said facing the lake, six guards with M-16s keeping a polite distance. He took a drag then faced Grey. 'This is off the record, way off the fucking record. What would it take to get those old nukes working?'

'Working?' Grey repeated.

'To get the old nukes ready to go bang?' Johnno carefully mouthed.

Grey's eyes narrowed. 'I hope you're not going anywhere with this?'

'What would you need?' Johnno pressed. 'And, could an amateur make it go bang?'

Grey gave it some thought, noting two ribs on the lake. He shrugged. 'With a shopping list and a hell of a credit card limit, I could make them go bang.' Johnno stared, but said nothing. Grey finally added, 'The hard bit, for any amateur nuke builder, would be the plutonium and the inner casing. After that, not so hard. You need a good explosive, like C4 or its predecessors, and a decent timing mechanism to set-off the shaped charges at the exact same instant.'

Johnno took in the lake, taking a long, slow drag. 'Do me a favour. Draw up a shopping list of what would be needed, then let my people know where to get it from.'

'Excuse me?'

Johnno could not help but grin. 'Don't worry, we don't have them ... and we ain't planning on putting some together. But if some other fuckhead has been trying to put them together then he's been buying bits - and not from Radio Shack or Tandy.'

'You want to try and trace such a ... person,' Grey stated.

'Already got a suspect, and he fits the bill.'

‘And if he’s been shopping?’

Johno made strong eye contact. ‘Ask your boss to give me a call. Get the troops ready.’

‘This ... *suspect*. Which country?’

‘About ... ninety miles from here. Austria.’

‘Austria?’ Grey queried.

Johno put his hand on Grey’s arm. ‘I want that shopping list in ten minutes. Forget the cave for now.’

Grey offered the side of Johno’s head a look, issuing a sigh. ‘And Radioshack and Tandy went out of business twenty years ago, old man.’ Grey headed inside at a brisk pace.

‘They did?’ Johno muttered. ‘No one ever tells me anything!’

Under new management

1

Johno accepted an unsolicited tea from Simon in Beesely's office. 'You're getting good at this.' Johno sipped, observing Simon as the big man hovered. 'Something on your mind?'

Simon glanced at the door and then sat. 'The men are concerned. With Herr Beesely sick, maybe dying, and the loses we are taking there are some ... lowered heads around here.'

Johno eased back, staring back at Simon. 'I guess the men don't see me being as good an organiser as Beesely. And they'd be right, I'm crap at office stuff.'

Simon's look suggested he agreed.

Johno asked, 'Will they follow me?'

'Most have great faith in you when it comes to ... battles. Less faith when it comes to ... running a large organisation. The men have seen Herr Beesely pick-up the phone and get Apaches and the British SAS landing, people like the Israelis visiting ... the Swiss Government and the bank Society respecting him.'

'I could wear my medals,' Johno lightly offered, Simon mustering a tired smile. Johno became serious, sipping his tea and staring into it. 'I have no intention of running this place,' he said without looking up. 'Once we get Luchenkov -' He rolled his eyes. '- and the nukes, I'll hand K2 back to Otto and piss off.'

Simon straightened in his seat. 'You'll go?'

Johno cradled his mug of tea as he thought. Without looking up he began, 'Simon, I like being here, like it a lot. But I'm not Beesely, and I don't know if I can hold this place together with the kind of crisis we seem to get - *every fucking week*. When Otto gets back I'll have a chat, then see.'

He stretched his neck muscles. ‘That speech from Otto yesterday, or this morning, was all well and good, but I don’t like losing people. I’ve a better understanding now of what Beesely went through in his life; training people, sending them off and then burying them. It’s not a pleasant feeling in your gut.’

Simon gave a tired nod. ‘I know,’ he sympathised. ‘I knew *all* of the guards we lost. One was my cousin.’

Johno stared into his tea. ‘It takes someone, someone like Beesely, with his pedigree, to deal with that stuff. Never really appreciated that before now because I was the fucker being sent out!’

‘I won’t be telling the men this. And I hope you stay. Maybe between you and Otto, and the managers ...’

‘Maybe, maybe, maybe. Story of my fucking life.’

The managers started to file in, Simon jumping up and standing off to one side. Two large screens were wheeled in.

‘What are those?’ Johno asked, squinting through tired eyes.

‘They were ordered a few days ago by Herr Beesely, sir,’ a manager explained. ‘They are secure video conferencing links.’

‘Ah, good idea,’ Johno acknowledged. ‘Better than shouting down the fucking desk phone.’

The screens were plugged in, a light blue ‘test’ message displayed, some satellite information and a digital clock displaying the time – of somewhere; it certainly wasn’t Swiss time.

‘Sir?’ came from the desk phone.

‘Yeah?’

‘Herr Stanton, sir.’

‘Put him through,’ Johno said towards the phone, then became startled by a four-foot high image of Oliver Stanton on the screen, suited and sat behind a large desk, some other men visible behind him. ‘Christ, that was quick.’

‘We got the details of your secure line half an hour ago,’ Oliver explained.

Johno then noticed a small black and white image of himself and the desk in the bottom left corner of the screen. He waved.

‘You see me OK?’ Stanton asked.

‘Yep, larger than life. Any word on Luchenkov?’

‘First things first, Johno. Got a tie?’

Johno eyes widened as he stared at the image of Mr. Stanton. ‘Tie?’

‘You’ll be getting a video conference call from The Secretary of State for Defense shortly,’ Stanton explained.

‘I will?’ Johno asked as a manager approached. The man lifted Johno’s shirt collars, a readymade tie placed over his head a second later and adjusted by Johno.

‘That better?’ Johno asked. ‘Do I need a breath mint?’

‘That’s better,’ Stanton approved, a smile creasing one cheek. ‘The Secretary will want to chat about Luchenkov, since NATO is now at Def Con Three.’

‘They are?’

‘We just lost a large part of the British surface fleet, a serious dent in NATO’s northern flank. The question is one of a Russian threat.’

‘Is there one?’ Johno asked, adjusting his tie.

‘No,’ Stanton firmly answered. ‘Their military was seriously set back after the fall of communism and has been left to rot. Current economic successes in Russia have not boosted their military much. So no, in a word.’

‘Why the call from whatshisface?’

‘Secretary Hoskins, his name is. He’s covering all the bases, just in case.’

‘Being a politician then?’ Johno asked, easing back.

Stanton smiled. ‘You’re learning. On that other matter, we’ve investigated the shopping list Mr. Grey and our people came up with.’

‘And?’ Johno sipped his tea.

‘Numerous items purchased quietly over the past ten years, but a great many items ordered the day you and Beesely set foot in K2.’

Johno sat forwards, hands on the desk. ‘Well *we* didn’t buy the bloody stuff.’

‘No, but you being there prompted someone else to get a move on and get them ready.’

‘Johan Shue in Austria?’ Johno stated, staring out of focus.

‘Yes.’

Johno took a moment. ‘Claus, what was this guy’s link to Gunter?’

Claus leant forwards. ‘They knew each other from the Wehrmacht and co-operated in their dealings with stolen art works.’

‘Did Otto break ties with this guy?’ Johno asked.

‘No, sir. Herr Gunter *fell-out*, as you English say, some ten years ago.’

‘Just when the purchases started,’ came Stanton’s voice.

Johno stretched his back. ‘So Gunter, quite wisely, was against their assembly, this twat Shue wasn’t.’

‘It would seem so,’ Stanton agreed. ‘But we’ve checked out this guy thoroughly. Nothing in his profile would suggest such a move, he’s always been ultra stealthy, collecting and dealing in art. Not so much as a parking ticket.’

Johno faced Claus. ‘You knew him best, so any clues? What’s this guy want with two old nukes?’

‘It baffles me, sir. I would have bet my life that this man would not be so foolish. The same for Gunter.’

‘And yet the nuke casings are buried here,’ Johno pointedly remarked, Claus offering an exasperated shrug. Johno faced the screen. ‘You guys got any clues?’

‘None,’ Stanton confirmed. ‘No links to terrorist, plenty of links to criminal gangs, but none that might want a nuke.’

‘Is this guy rich?’ Johno asked Claus.

‘Very rich,’ Claus responded.

‘So, no need to sell them,’ Johno mused as Claus opened a file and handed over an A4 colour photo.

‘That is his castle,’ Claus explained.

‘I’ve seen this before,’ Johno muttered.

‘It is very famous,’ Claus explained. ‘It is a top hotel, very expensive, perhaps twenty palatial rooms.’

Johno studied the picture of the castle. Beautifully ornate white stone, it seemed to grow seamlessly upwards from a white cliff-face and some eight stories, crowned with towers and spires competing for space. ‘Looks pretty fucking impregnable,’ he commented, making eye contact with Claus.

‘It is,’ Claus reluctantly admitted. ‘Only one access road, a single track winding around a mountain for seven kilometres, access to that road made through a valley gorge with a smaller castle manned by guards and with a strong drawbridge. The sides of the mountain it sits on are sheer, five hundred metres down to a fast flowing river. There is also the problem of the caves.’

‘Caves?’ Johno repeated.

‘Caves were made into the mountain it sits on, all the way down to the river and into the next mountain.

Johno studied the photograph, holding it close to his face. The castle’s drawbridge could only be accessed by a narrow span of stone bridge, perhaps twenty yards long, then the road cut into another cliff. The pinnacle that the castle perched on stood isolated, a sheer drop under the access bridge. ‘That road may have been big enough to carry the nukes inside, but no way they lugged them down into a cave,’ Johno suggested.

‘There is a lift,’ Claus informed the room. ‘Big enough for ten people.’

‘That still ain’t big enough for the nukes,’ Johno insisted. ‘So they got in from someplace else.’ Johno faced

the screen. 'Didn't you say that they'd be leaky as hell by now?'

'Yes.'

'So they ain't in the castle, toasting the visitors, they're in a cave down below.'

'We think so,' Stanton affirmed.

Johno put down the photograph and faced the screen, easing back. 'Who's deal is this?'

Stanton took a moment, glancing at people out of shot. 'They're our nukes.'

'And?'

'Johno, if you did not know about us ... how would *you* handle this?'

'Given that Gunter had a hand in fetching up them nukes I'd want it to be dealt with *very* quietly.'

'Would that be your only reason for getting involved?' Stanton enigmatically enquired.

Johno puzzled that question as he stared at the screen. 'No. If K2 came across someone around here with a nuke we'd jump all over them of course. Why'd you ask?'

Stanton ignored the question. 'Johno, if you had our support, what would be your course of action?'

Johno made a face, giving it some thought. 'I'd go and have a chat with this guy, having first stacked the deck. If he didn't want to give up the nukes I'd arrange a sneak attack on the castle whilst our Apaches took the top of the castle off. Naturally, the Austrians would be a bit pissed at that, so I'd rope them in first, having you guys stood ready with some B2 bombers to level the mountain if things got out of hand.

'Surrounding the castle and asking him nicely would give him time to move the nukes outdoors and set them off.' He faced Claus. 'Nearest big town?'

'Nothing for twenty kilometres.'

'Really? What about villages?'

'Seven kilometres, the other side of the mountain.'

Johnno puzzled it. 'So even if the nukes did go off, no fucker would be hurt.'

Claus nodded as Johnno turned back to the screen. Johnno said, 'We could make a nice big bang without anyone noticing. First step would be to surround the place discreetly with K2 agents, then get the Swiss, Czechs and Germans on their borders just in case.'

'Sounds like a plan, Johnno,' Stanton approved. 'And very similar to our guy's evaluation.'

'Fucking egg heads, what do they know!'

Stanton smiled, but cautioned, 'When the Secretary calls, I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't ... you know ... be yourself.'

Johnno smiled widely. 'I'll pretend I'm Beesely.'

'That may not work either. I remember him punching a former Secretary, back in the seventies.'

'So you know where I get it from!'

'We'll be listening in to the conference,' Stanton suggested.

Johnno offered a look of mock concern. 'What, you'll be spying on your own government? Tut tut tut.'

'No mention of us to the Secretary, even though he's one of ours.'

'Should I go through proper channels and ask him nicely for some B2s?'

'Yes. Give him the full story. He's aware of most of the detail of K2.'

'So, he knows, we know, we both know that we know, but we don't mention it. Just like being married and cheating.'

Smiling, Stanton cut the line, Johnno sipping his tea.

'OK,' Johnno began. 'Ready the Apaches for a strike on Shue's castle in the next few days. Move agents to within ten kilometres of the castle, observation for now, very discreet. I want everything we know about this guy on this desk today.'

‘I want ten of our best climbers ready to go, but first let’s see if they think they can get into this place. I want those thermal images that the yanks got us for the complex in the Czech Republic, this time for Shue’s castle - I want to know where those caves exit. Ready ‘A’ Squadron for an attack up the road, ‘B’ Squadron for an attack through the caves.’

‘What about further attacks here?’ Claus asked, clearly concerned at the planned deployments.

‘I think Luchenkov’s fired his shot. No other aircraft or missiles will get close, not now.’ Claus did not look convinced, so Johnno offered him a gentle, flat palm.

‘And what of our search for Luchenkov?’ a manager asked.

Johnno rubbed his face, clearly tired. ‘We continue with searching Bulgaria and looking for that boat. But gentlemen, and lady, if Luchenkov escaping is the price we pay for getting the nukes, then so be it. *They* ... are the priority.’

The managers filed out.

Simon remained. ‘Herr Beesely is stable in hospital,’ he informed Johnno.

Johnno stared out of the open door for a moment. ‘Good. Let’s try and get the war won before he gets back. Leave him a clear desk.’

‘Earlier you were thinking of leaving,’ Simon delicately broached.

Johnno shrugged, still staring towards the open door. ‘Got to fix the nukes first.’

Simon nodded, unseen, and stepped to the door. A shot bent him double, but he forced himself up quickly. Johnno jumped up, reaching for his pistol, a guard visible the other side of Simon. Simon snatched in vain for the man’s pistol, blocking Johnno’s shot.

A second shot registered, followed closely by a flurry of echoing shots, an alarm sounding. Simon dropped to the floor, the guard crumpling against the doorpost, trying to right himself and aim at Johnno.

Johno put six rounds into the man, knocking him backwards and against the walkway railings. He leapt forwards, jumping over Simon and kicking away the man's weapon as other guards arrived. 'Medic!'

'That's Rom!' a guard gasped. 'You killed Rom!'

'He shot Simon,' Johno stated, kneeling now and turning to Simon as he lay groaning, one shot to his stomach, another in the upper arm. 'Medic!' Johno repeated, laying Simon down. 'Get a stretcher!' He held the side of Simon's head. 'Take it easy, buddy.'

'He was coming ... for you,' Simon managed to get out.

Johno glanced at Rom's lifeless form. 'Get him out of here, full background check!'

'He's been with us ... six years,' Simon forced out, his eyes firmly closed in pain.

Again Johno glanced at the man, seeing if he recognised him.

More guards appeared, indistinct shouting in the distance as a doctor jumped down next to Johno, opening his bag. Two white dressings were shoved right into the stomach wound, front and back, causing Simon to gasp, padded down on top by two more. A tourniquet was fitted to Simon's arm, despite the fact that he still had his padded jacket on. Johno held the arm wound with both hands, applying pressure.

With Simon stretchered out, Johno stood and stared down at the blood on the magnolia carpet, now surrounded by a curtain of guards. He leant over the balcony, finding Claus amongst the shocked crowd. 'That bastard came after me! I want his file checked. Now!'

'He has been with us for many years, sir,' Claus stated from below.

'Then why the fuck did he shoot Simon, trying to get to me?' Johno barked. No one answered. 'Could Shue have got to him?' Johno asked. 'Before, when he was friendly with Gunter?'

‘We will have to check his contacts, sir,’ Claus offered, dispatching several managers.

Johno took a long breath, calming himself. ‘Who else fired?’ The manager called Alex walked forwards, raising a hand. ‘What did you see?’ Johno asked, a few degrees calmer.

‘I saw this guard approach your office and draw his weapon. He looked suspicious, so I drew my weapon. After he shot Simon I shot him three times, sir.’

Johno stared down for several seconds. ‘Well done, you may’ve saved my life. Simon was stood in the way, so I didn’t have a clear shot. Fuckers so big he blocked the bloody door.’ Johno wiped the blood on his hands down his jacket as Thomas came running.

‘You are hurt?’ Thomas asked as he closed, looking horrified.

‘No, I’m fine. But Simon was shot.’

‘Big Simon?’

Johno nodded. ‘C’mon, help me clean up.’ He led the boy out, flanked by guards.

* * *

In a buoyant voice Pepi informed the assembled group that K2 had discovered the nuclear bomb casings.

‘You sound ... pleased?’ a man challenged.

‘I am. I have no doubt that this ‘hot-head’ Johno will go after Herr Shue, saving us the trouble and closing that chapter. Not only that, I believe they will go to great pains to keep it quiet, Shue’s bombs and his foolish treasure quest.’

‘Maybe K2 are not so stupid,’ a man put in. Everyone focused on him. He continued, ‘They have been very clever up to now, and we haven’t made any progress in this ... expensive endeavour.’ Many of the assembled men agreed with that sentiment. He added, ‘Maybe there is some credit

to Shue's search of these caves, something of interest in there.'

'Gentlemen, I know *exactly* what is in those caves. Which is why we have left Shue alone to quietly pursue his obsession. What is in those caves is of concern to our Vatican friends, but not to us.'

At the end of the meeting, concluded with a less than harmonious summary, Pepi stepped into his study and found the Cardinal waiting.

'Cardinal Ramon, a pleasure as always. Drink?'

Ramon stood. 'No, thank you. You have heard?'

'Of course.'

'We cannot let the English into Shue's caves,' the Cardinal adamantly stated.

'There is nothing of interest inside –'

'There is ... potential damage ... to us!'

'Then you must act as you see fit, Eminence,' Pepi offered, a neutral expression for his guest.

Cardinal Ramon walked briskly out.

2

Beesely opened his eyes, finding the top of Otto's head, his offspring sitting to the side of the bed with his eyes closed. 'Otto?' Beesely called in a weak voice.

Otto lifted up, fighting the fatigue and forcing a smile. 'How are you?'

'Alive, so it would seem,' Beesely whispered.

'You had a stroke,' Otto informed him. 'Not a heart attack, despite your fondness for Bavarian Napoleon.'

'You're not supposed to know about that,' Beesely croaked.

Otto smiled. 'I am Swiss. I know what that cake should taste like, with out without sugar.'

Beesely noted the tubes into his arms, the machine to his right relaying his vitals. 'What's going to happen to me?'

'Can you move your left arm or leg?' Otto asked, suddenly serious.

Beesely tried for several seconds, causing just slight movements. He shook his head.

Otto pinched the skin on Beesely's exposed arm. 'You feel that?'

'Not really.'

Otto repeated the test on Beesely's left leg, and on the side of his face.

'I can feel the face a bit. Feels like I've been to the dentist.'

Otto took a long breath. 'You have lost the use of your left side. It is not reversible, the damage is in your brain. But the Anadin concentrate Johnno gave you may have saved a heart attack.'

Beesely glanced at the ceiling for a moment, finally turning back to Otto. 'Don't worry for me, Otto.'

Otto stared back for several seconds. Softly he said, 'I have only just found you. I am not ready to lose you.'

Beesely took a moment to think. 'Otto, I am proud of you, proud of the man you have grown into, despite being raised by Gunter. And if I had known about you earlier, I would have come for you.' He coughed, Otto providing a drink. 'Don't put your life on hold for me,' he forced out.

Otto lowered his head. 'I left Johnno at the castle this morning ... and I have not spoken to him since. I left him to cope. I was here, with you.'

'What's been happening?' Beesely asked in a weak voice.

Otto lifted his head. 'They are repairing the castle, no further attacks. You know about the bomb in England, in Portsmouth—'

'Portsmouth?'

Otto nodded. 'The boat on the river with explosives we were warned about. Not London, but Portsmouth. The ship, Ark Royal, was sunk, and two more of your navy ships damaged.'

Beesely lay back. 'Oh no,' he whispered.

Otto continued, 'We found the casings to the American nuclear bombs in the tank room, Mr. Grey is here. But the bombs are in Austria, being made ready to explode by an old friend of Gunter.' Beesely turned his head, making strong eye contact. 'We don't know why yet. Johnno is preparing an assault.'

'How is he coping?'

'Very well,' Otto admitted. 'The more pressure, the better he becomes. Not like me.' Beesely studied him, Otto adding, 'He sent your rescue force from Swindon to Portsmouth. It has been on every TV screen in the world. Our people parachuted in to help.'

'Oh ... excellent,' Beesely forced out.

'And Johnno sent hundreds of millions of pounds to private hospitals in England to care for the wounded. The people who are burnt are being offered treatment in Europe. Johnno's idea.'

Beesely couldn't help crying, Otto wiping his eyes. He struggled with, 'Johnno did all this, by himself?'

Otto nodded. 'Yes, all his idea.' His phone chirped. Excusing himself he stood and walked away, taking the call. Returning he hesitated, noticed by Beesely.

'What is it?' Beesely croaked.

'One of our guards, a long serving guard, just tried to kill Johnno. He shot Simon, the Guard Commander.'

Beesely shot Otto a puzzled look. 'As far as I know, he's not touched anyone's wife yet!' Otto couldn't help laughing. Beesely forced out, 'It sounds like he could do with your help. I'd hate to lose any more of my children.'

'My place is here,' Otto suggested.

Whispering, Beesely began, 'Go and help your brother, Otto. Or I will worry, and get that heart attack I missed earlier.'

Otto regarded his father for several seconds. 'I will return in the morning.'

'If I'm not here, check the local nightclubs!'

* * *

Helen sat on the floor of her lounge, two crumpled, handwritten notes lying next to her. The house looked a mess. Items had been grabbed and packed up quickly, many items of clothing left lying on the floor, the stairs and the landing.

Sobbing almost silently Helen held her daughter's sweatshirt over her face, slowly crumpling into heap on the carpet.

4

Suited now, Johno walked briskly along the companionway, Mavo and Blinkey in tow. He walked into his office, the two ex-troopers taking up station outside, noted by all the managers. He jabbed the phone. 'Have those yanks been trying to call?'

'Yes, sir. Ready when you are.'

'Get me a coffee, send in Claus, put the yanks on.'

Claus entered as the screen flickered and came to life. Hoskins was centre screen, several heads visible to either side of a long table, mostly generals in green Army, or blue Air Force, uniforms.

'Can you hear us?' Hoskins asked.

'Yeah,' Johno replied. 'Are you up early, or late getting to bed?'

Several men smiled.

'It's 9am here,' Hoskins responded. 'And my screen says... what five in the evening there?'

‘Been a bit hectic today. Kinda lost track of time.’

‘I can imagine. We’re just about up to speed on what happened your end, but do you want to bring us up to date.’

Johno took a breath. ‘We got news yesterday that Luchenkov skipped prison ... and we got hit by a cruise missile shortly after.’

‘Did you say ... a cruise missile?’

‘Old Russian cruise missile, launched off the back of a lorry. We’ve got the lorry. Then we were on the receiving end of two Cessna light aircraft packed with explosives on remote control, some sort of GPS navigation system.’

‘How badly damaged is your facility?’

‘Fortunately, we’re underground. We have an old castle we use as guest quarters - top of it was blown off. Fifty dead and two hundred wounded.’

‘Jesus! So many?’

‘Cessna we shot down corkscrewed right onto a guarded gate, thirty men on duty got the full blast. Unlucky hit. But lucky in some ways.’

‘How so?’

‘The cruise missile opened up a crack in an underground tunnel, so we poked our heads in. Inside are the radioactive old casings from two of your old nukes.’

Johno could see men glancing at each other and whispering.

‘And the location of these ... *old nukes*?’

‘Spitting distance from here, just across the border into Austria. Being made ready to go *pop* as we speak, sir.’

Many of the Generals shifted in their seats, clearly concerned.

‘Can you be sure of that?’ Hoskins pressed.

‘Yes. We tracked back what would be needed to make one of these things go off, drew up a list and then checked who had bought the kit. That directed us right back to who we thought had them.’

‘And what first led you to this ... *person*?’

‘Not something to discuss on this line, just in case.’

‘It’s a secure line –’

‘I don’t care. You want to know that, you fly over and buy me a bagel, then we’ll chat.’

‘Very well. Let’s come back to that matter later. First, we are at Def Con Three because of the serious nature of the attack on England. You have been at the centre of Luchenkov’s attention, so the question is – is this sanctioned from the Russian President down?’

‘I guess you’d be better qualified at answering that one. But our intel’ says that our friend Borris acted alone, and out of vengeance. The Russians locked him up, took his assets, discredited him. No way he could have realised his political ambitions after that. So no, I don’t think so. If you are asking ... is the Russian President happy the UK got hit, then probably. But that doesn’t mean he leant a hand.

‘The Russians sell their oil and gas to Europe, so the last thing they want is for the European economy to be screwed, which is probably the way it’s headed after today’s fun and games.’

Hoskins sat nodding. ‘That’s our assessment also, but we have to cover the bases.’

‘Yeah, well right now those two old nukes are more of a problem.’

‘How so?’

‘Coming on top of everything else, what do you thing would happen to the World’s stock markets if they go bang in sunny Euro-Disney?’

‘Yes, a problem.’

‘A very big problem, sir. Which is why I’m going after them.’

‘You’re ... going after them?’

‘Yes, the plan’s already in place.’

‘And just how do you expect to deal with this problem? They are not on Swiss soil and –’

‘We have a squadron of Apaches with the Swiss Air Force, plus a couple a hundred commandos here ready to go. They all know the country and are excellent mountain climbers. Besides, I know a way in to where they’re held. Might just get away without too many shots fired.’

‘This is our problem –’

‘And what would you ... *learned Gentlemen* do, exactly?’

Hoskins hesitated. ‘We’ll be in contact with the relevant governments soon and –’

‘And you’ll tip off the guys with the nukes, who are well connected enough to have infiltrated the Austria Government, Police and Military. As soon as you make that call the nukes go bang or they get moved. Then Europe’s economy takes a nosedive. Are you willing to take that chance?’

‘It’s not my final decision, the President –’

‘Listen!’ Johnno said as he stood, walking around the desk and then sitting on the edge, facing the screen. ‘I will accept any help you offer, but understand this. Within twenty-four hours we move on the people holding the nukes, sooner if we see any sign of you contacting the Austrians – who *we’ve* infiltrated at the highest levels.

‘This is my problem and I’m going to deal with it quietly. Very fucking quietly! We’ll get the nukes, we’ll kill the people holding them and then bury this whole fucking saga under a few million tonnes of rock so that it will *never* ... see the light of day, and no one in Europe will be any the wiser.

‘There’s already enough panic in the UK and Europe without this adding to it! If you want to help, then you get back to me 9am tomorrow, my time. If not, stay out of my sodding way!’

Johnno walked back to the desk, hit a button and ordered the line cut. With Claus watching, he made himself a Vodka Red Bull.

‘The Americans will not be happy,’ Claus commented.

‘That’s their problem, I have other things to consider. We got away with the Czech cave complex, no link to Gunter. But if those nukes get into the press...’

‘We would be finished,’ Claus unhappily pointed out.

Otto stepped through the door.

Johno observed him carefully as he stepped up to the desk. ‘How’s the old fart?’

‘Alive,’ Otto answered, sitting off to one side. ‘But with the loss of use of his left arm and leg.’

‘A stroke?’

Otto nodded.

Johno sipped his drink. ‘I just pissed off the White House.’

Otto faced Claus, whose expression suggested Johno could be right. He turned back to Johno, not looking too concerned. ‘How so?’

‘They wanted to tip off the Austrian Government.’

‘Shue would know straight away.’

‘I think he does already,’ Johno pointed out. ‘Hence the guard trying to kill me.’

Claus put in, ‘We have searched this man’s house and checked his calls. No connection to Austria or Shue, some odd calls to Italy, to Rome.’

‘Does Shue have a base there?’ Johno asked.

‘No, he hates Italians, if I recall. In particular, he dislikes the Vatican.’

‘Well I’m reasonably sure we haven’t pissed off the Vatican,’ Johno joked. He faced Otto. ‘That incapacity will be a surprise.’

‘It had to be done, for ... everyone’s benefit.’

Johno slowly nodded, sipping his drink. ‘When do I, you know, transfer it back to you?’

‘You do not,’ Otto firmly stated.

Johno’s eyes narrowed, focusing on him. ‘I don’t?’

‘No. In the eyes of the law I could never end up with equity in the bank. It would raise ... questions.’

‘I think the people out there got bigger things to worry about right now.’

‘Even so, I must remain an employee.’

Johno stood, gesturing towards his seat. ‘Then start working for a living.’

‘That ... is not my chair. It never was, and cannot be. And so far, Johno, you have filled it well.’

Johno stared back for several seconds before focusing on Claus, a questioning look.

‘I agree,’ Claus offered.

‘Sir?’ buzzed from the phone.

‘Yeah?’ Johno instinctively answered.

‘Oliver Stanton, sir.’

‘Now I’m in the shit.’ He sat and leant towards the phone. ‘OK, put him through.’ Stanton’s image appeared on the screen. ‘Shit, I wish you’d stop doing that. I’m still shouting into the damn phone.’

Stanton smiled. ‘Get with the technology, Johno.’

‘You lot pissed at me?’

‘Not at all, you did exactly what we all wanted.’

‘I did?’

‘Yes, you let *us Yanks* off the hook.’

‘I did?’

‘Yes, by insisting that you handle it quietly. Got some respect over here too. Now we can justifiably say that we tried, but were warned off, leaving the Europeans to sort it out amongst themselves. Perfect.’

‘Does that mean no B2 bombers?’

‘B2 bombers?’ Otto repeated, a worried look.

‘Who’s that?’ Stanton asked, Otto walking into shot.

‘Ah, Otto. How’s Beesely?’

‘A stroke, disabling him down the left side.’

‘People survive with those for years,’ Stanton pointed out.

‘Let us hope so,’ Otto commented.

‘As for the B2s, I think some people will be up late tonight to take your conference call 9am tomorrow. I also think that our Delta Force will be on standby in Germany, a squadron or two of Apaches, some F15s and, of course, the odd B2 circling ready.’

‘Let us hope they are not needed,’ Otto suggested.

‘Let’s hope so,’ Stanton agreed. ‘Apparently, Johno is going to go and knock on this guy’s door and talk nicely to him.’

Otto faced Johno with a puzzled, if not concerned, look.

‘I’ll catch you at 8am, Herr Director,’ Stanton signed off with. The screen went back to the digital clock.

Otto held his gaze on Johno. ‘What are you planning on doing?’

‘I’ve got an idea, but I need to sleep on it. We’ll kick it around tomorrow. Anyway, I’m Herr Director.’ He pressed the desk phone. ‘Send for Mathius, plus the heads of all groups divisions. When they’re here, all managers and deputies for a meeting. No, forget that, make it 8am.’

‘This office will not be big enough for all of those people,’ Claus pointed out.

‘We’ll pack ‘em in,’ Johno said with a smile as he stood. ‘Otto, let’s walk.’

In the Great Hall guards bustled about, an ant-like line of builders moving back and forth towards the restaurant. Johno walked slowly, observing the scene and chatting to many, Mavo and Blinkey close by. In the courtyard Johno winked at Mavo, the safety on Mavo’s MP5 discreetly released.

At the drawbridge they met Simon’s deputy. ‘How’s Simon? Any news?’ Johno enquired.

‘He should recover, sir. But the arm, it maybe not so good after, the bone was shattered.’

Johno nodded, saddened. He sighed, ‘Keep me up to date.’

Stepping out he noticed the Swiss Army Colonel stood across the tarmac and next to a jeep. Johno waved, knocked down by Blinkey a second later. Two shots hit the drawbridge wall and spat back stone ricochet. A long burst from Mavo and a guard went down.

An alarm sounded as Johno turned his head, finding Otto led next to him. 'What you doing down here at my level?'

Otto lifted up as guards surrounded them. 'You do not seem too concerned.' He brushed himself down.

'I was hoping this would happen,' Johno said with a wink, accepting a hand up from Mavo. 'Now we find a link between these two guards. And we've eliminated Shue's spies here.'

'A dangerous game, Johno,' Otto pointed out, glancing nervously around.

'Back to normal duties!' Johno shouted at the guards. He lifted his phone. 'I want all the details of the guard who shot Simon cross-linked to the guard just shot at the drawbridge. End alarm.' He hung up. 'C'mon, let's stroll.'

Looking horrified at the idea Otto reluctantly followed Johno across the tarmac, flanked by Mavo and Blinkey, the other guards dismissed.

'Colonel,' Johno greeted.

The Colonel's attention remained firmly fixed on the dead guard, a horrified stare.

'You look like you've seen a ghost,' Johno casually commented, lighting up.

'What happened?' the Colonel gasped, still fixed on the dead man.

'Infiltrator,' Johno calmly responded.

'Here? I would not have thought it possible.'

Johno explained, 'We know who's behind it, someone who was close friends with Gunter for many years.' Johno observed two large mobile cranes positioned to the west of the castle.

'Still, to infiltrate K2...?'

‘We’re playing a ... more dangerous game, these days,’ Otto suggested. ‘And for much greater stakes.’

‘It’ll be getting dark soon, Colonel,’ Johnno began. ‘We’d like those of your men left to be moved up the road. Roadblocks. They’ve got no shelter here, so any more missiles and they’ll get themselves killed. But before they go, could they assemble here for a thank you?’

Still in shock, the Colonel nodded and headed off.

‘Now comes step three,’ Johnno muttered. He called over two more troopers. ‘OK, guys, listen up. I’ve called over the Swiss soldiers, fully expecting at least one of them to be working for the opposition, as with the last guard. Your job will be to spot the guy and kill the fucker ... before *he* kills me.’

‘Johnno –’ Otto began, silenced with a raised hand.

‘If we have spies here we’re paralysed. We’ve got to get them all. Since their aim is to kill me, I’ve got to be the bait.’

Looking terrified, but controlled, Otto waited with the others as the Swiss marched over. The two extra troopers stood off to one side, Mavo and Blinkey keeping themselves positioned where they had line of fire.

The soldiers assembled, none so far pointing a weapon towards Johnno; they all carried their neat and clean weapons over their shoulders. Finally they were lined up, the troopers intently watching the line, as well as guards moving past.

‘Gentlemen,’ Johnno called. ‘I would like to thank you all for being here today. You did not fire any shots in anger, which is good – Switzerland is a peaceful country.’

The tarmac in between them exploded, showering the soldiers with stones. Johnno hit the tarmac, grabbing his phone. ‘Cliff top commander! There’s a traitor in the cliff top!’

Muffled echoes of gunfire could be heard.

‘Johnno!’

‘Yes,’ he answered, still prone.

‘This is cliff top ... one of the men ... he fired towards you ... he’s shot, but alive.’

‘Make sure he stays alive! Get him to the chair room with a doctor, we need answers. Out.’ He scrambled up. Swiss Soldiers were groaning with minor shrapnel wounds, many lying and being assisted by colleagues. ‘Medics!’

The Colonel accepted help up from Otto as Johno closed in.

‘Apologies, Colonel, but I did warn you - this is a dangerous postcode. We’ll fix up your men and compensate them, but *please* try and suppress the news if you can. Make it look like an accident.’ Signalling the troopers Johno started towards the East Camp.

‘What now?’ Otto asked, aghast at what just happened.

Smiling, Johno showed Mavo the hole in his jacket that the fifty-calibre round had created. ‘Now we wander around all the new guards to see who wants to shoot me.’

‘Are you crazy?’ Otto whispered.

‘They’re *your* men,’ Johno pointedly remarked. ‘Do you want to work here knowing that there’re infiltrators in the camp?’ He waited, Otto not responding as they walked down the camp road. ‘Look’, Johno explained, ‘we have the advantage.’

‘We do?’ Otto asked, wide eyed.

‘Yeah. They’ve been ordered to kill me today, or at least as fast as possible. As soon as we opened up the cave with the nukes they were activated, sleeper agents here for years, put here by Shue ready for when Gunter – no, hang on, that don’t make sense. Gunter fished up the nukes. Anyway, they got activated as soon as I started taking an interest in Shue.’

He walked on, a slight frown forming. ‘Which begs the question, why shoot me? As far as the world thinks, I’m just a jumped up fucking bodyguard for Beesely.’

Otto explained, glancing nervously around, ‘When the incapacity will was activated this morning, the courts were notified.’

‘Ah, so Shue saw I was the new owner. Still, why shoot me, Beesely ain’t dead ... and you’re far more important than I am?’

‘I am hoping that I am not,’ Otto pointedly remarked.

‘Never mind, at least we’ve confirmed who it is, and got rid of the fifth column in one go.’

They walked for forty minutes, no one shooting at them.

‘Maybe that’s it,’ Johno said as they entered the courtyard, guards on edge and checking each other. On the command centre companionway he signalled Claus, then asked for the staff files of all three men, Claus walking in with the requested items a minute later. He appeared concerned. ‘Problem?’ Johno asked.

‘English television is blaming the English intelligence services for their failings in today’s attack.’

‘That’s normal,’ Johno scoffed. ‘Fucking PM’s fault, he knew about Luchenkov.’

‘And Dame Helen is on a flight heading here, sir. She has resigned.’

Johno glanced at Otto. ‘She didn’t resign,’ he quietly suggested.

‘No?’ Claus puzzled.

‘They would have pushed her out,’ Johno softly added.

‘And Mister Rawlins resigned as well,’ Claus added.

Johno slowly nodded to himself, staring towards the door as the three staff files were placed down. ‘Otto, if you don’t mind, have a look at these, I need a drink and an hour’s kip.’

He stood and walked out, flanked by Mavo and Blinkey. In the dungeon he stopped dead when he noticed a guard he knew sat dutifully watching the place. He approached the man, who could have killed him in his sleep dozens of times. ‘You won’t be needed tonight. In fact, tell the managers - no more guards down here at all, we’re short of people ... and your skills are best used elsewhere.’ He exchanged smiles with the man, who left in the lift.

Facing the troopers he said, 'From now on, two troopers are always here, wide-awake and on the clock. Someone comes down that lift or them stairs that ain't expected, assume the worst.'

The troopers plonked down on the sofa as Thomas emerged from the snug.

'Hey buddy,' Johnno called. 'Beer and two coffees.'

Thomas waved at the troopers, got the kettle on and pulled a beer as Johnno sat next to Mavo.

'Security's gone to fuck,' Mavo suggested.

'Maybe,' Johnno let out with a sigh. 'These sleeper agents were here for six years odd, working for a twat that old man Gunter was best mates with, so he knew all the ins and outs of this place. Be easy enough for them.'

'And the guy who punched Mister Grey a few weeks back,' Mavo added.

'CIA fucker,' Johnno commented. He turned his head, 'C'mon now, try and keep up with who's trying to kill us, will you!'

They chuckled as the beer was brought over. Johnno took a sip as Thomas plonked down.

'What has happened?' the boy asked.

'Did you ever here the name Johan Shue? In Austria?' Thomas shook his head. 'He was friends with Gunter, helped to set-up that cave we went through.' The boy's eyes widened. 'He had some of his people working here. They tried to kill me today because I'm going after their boss.'

'Why are you going after him?' Thomas asked.

'He has some nuclear bombs.' Mavo and Blinkey straightened. 'Yep,' Johnno confirmed to them. 'Dredged up some old 1972 American nukes that sank on a crashed yank bomber off Malta, fixed them up. Now he's planning on using them so we're going all out and attacking in a day or so.'

'Shit!' Mavo let out,

The lift lights activated, Johno taking out his pistol, Mavo and Blinkey jumping up and positioned themselves to either side of the lift. A junior manager appeared, files in hand. He stopped dead when he noticed the troopers.

‘Files for you, sir, sent by Claus. These are the service records of the three men –’

‘Check him for weapons!’ Johno barked.

The files hit the floor.

‘Espirito Christo –’ the man got out as he reached for his pistol, shot four times by Johno. As the man fell forwards and hit the floor the troopers opened up, ten rounds a piece.

Johno casually lifted his phone. ‘Send down Claus, and a body bag. All other K2 staff are banned from the dungeon, only Claus, Otto and troopers I nominate.’ He stood over the man. ‘What did he say?’

‘Couldn’t make it out,’ Mavo commented, swapping magazines.

‘Sounded like *espirito christo*,’ Blinkey suggested.

‘What the fuck language is that?’

‘Austrian?’ Mavo suggested.

‘*They* ... speak German, dope!’ Johno pointed out.

‘It’s Latin,’ Thomas suggested. ‘I know it, it is written on the wall in my music teacher’s house. I think it means *spirit of Christ is here with me*.’

‘Knew you’d kill him,’ Mavo began, ‘so he said his prayers.’

Claus and Otto appeared from the lift with a ping, immediately stopping and staring down at the body.

‘He tried to shoot you?’ Claus gasped.

‘Yep,’ Johno said, removing the man’s pistol and handing it to Claus. ‘But at least he said his prayers first. Claus, pop to the courtyard and grab a body bag, no guards come down here.’ Claus hurried into the lift.

Otto stood over the man. ‘I interviewed this man. He worked at the bank before he came here, an excellent junior manager.’ He shook his head in disbelief.

‘Hope that’s the last of them,’ Johnno commented as he reclaimed his beer and gulped.

Otto sat next to him. ‘This is out of control.’

‘No, actually we’re doing well,’ Johnno countered. ‘They all failed to kill me. So next they’ll get desperate, and I’ll set some traps.’ He lifted his phone. ‘It’s Johnno. Listen, I want all the guards who have those fake moustaches that look like me to be wearing them till I say to stop. Especially in the town, understand?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘*We’ve* got some,’ Mavo offered with a grin.

Johnno shot him a look before reluctantly nodded. ‘Fine. Every fucker put them on.’ He sipped his beer, taking a moment to relax as the dead body gurgled.

‘He is alive?’ Otto asked.

‘No,’ Johnno casually commented. ‘Bodies do that.’

Otto grabbed Johnno’s beer and took a big mouthful.

‘I’ll get you a drink, Uncle Otto,’ Thomas offered, rushing around to the pumps.

‘What happened to that coffee?’ Mavo asked him Thomas.

‘Moment, bitte!’ Thomas snapped.

Johnno laughed as the troopers sat back down.

With the body removed, and Otto off checking their files, peace reclaimed the dungeon. After a few ‘shorts’ Johnno was now relaxed, the troopers sat facing the lift, coffees in hand, Abba playing in the background – whether the guests liked it or not. Thomas fixed several microwave cheeseburgers, gratefully received by the men, the empty wrappers crunched up and thrown back at him.

Johnno’s phone vibrated. ‘Yeah?’

‘It is Claus, sir. It is starting to get dark. Your instructions?’

‘Keep the lights on, builders working as fast as they can, but inner areas sealed, especially the command centre. All staff searched in and out, and I mean *all*.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Any non-essential staff, send them home. And make sure there are plenty of visitors for our staff in hospital tonight. Go and visit Beesely, ask Mathius to do the same.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Ask Otto to stay in the castle tonight, if he wouldn’t mind. That may be a good idea for you and the others too, just in case.’

‘I understand.’

Johno hung up.

‘More?’ Thomas asked, pointing at Johno’s near-empty beer glass.

‘Yeah. And another cheeseburger. Red Bull for the lads.’

Thomas diligently served everyone.

Twenty minutes later Johno’s phone buzzed, waking him from a light sleep. ‘Yeah?’

‘Sir, Dame Helen will be here in five minutes.’

‘Make a room up for her, put some drink in it.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Then send her down here.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Thomas, extractors on, air freshener, hide the porn.’

‘Who’s coming?’

‘Dame Helen.’

‘And Tabitha?’ Thomas excitedly enquired.

‘Nope, I think it’s just her. Best ... behaviour, OK?’

The boy lowered his head, giving a reluctant, ‘OK.’

Mavo turned his head. ‘With all the shit going on in the UK, how’d she get the time to come here?’

‘They kicked her out.’

‘They what?’

‘Yep. Some fucker had to take the blame, she got picked.’

‘Poor sod,’ Mavo commented.

‘Listen, when she gets here, stick two chairs in the lift, take it up to the foyer, lock it open and stay there. Rotate

with the other troopers when you like, but *no* K2 guards in the lift. I need to chat to Helen, she's going to be well fucked off at the world.'

'She don't blame us for what happened, does she?' Mavo asked.

'Fucking hope not. But we did start all this.'

A very strange night

1

When Dame Helen stepped from the lift the troopers greeted her politely, sitting in the lift with their chairs, curiously observed. They elevated out of view.

Johno slouched, firmly rooted to the sofa, beer in hand. 'Need a drink, love?'

She sat, giving a gentle nod.

'Thomas, white wine, nice glass.'

'I know which one,' the lad complained.

'How's Beesely?' she softly asked, looking a little haggard.

'Stroke. Left side gone. But he'll survive a while yet.'

'Otto OK?'

'A bit shook up today. Four K2 guards tried to kill me.'

She grilled him with her stare. 'What did you do?'

He smiled widely. 'Infiltrators. Sleeper agents, been here six years, one a junior manager. You just stepped through the blood stain.'

She looked over her shoulder.

'I cleaned it,' Thomas insisted, handing her a wine. She downed it in one and sighed.

'Shit, someone had a rough day. Thomas, another wine.'

'So, who were the sleeper agents working for?'

'Remember those nukes you warned us about? The guy who has them.'

'Who?'

'Fella called Johan Shue, lives in picturesque Austria.'

'How did he get hold of them?'

Thomas handed her another wine, this one sipped.

'He was best buddies with Gunter back in the day, snuck about in a certain Czech mine for a while.'

'Christ, he was involved with that?'

‘Just as you said. Now he’s got them all ready to go pop.’

‘He’s what?’ she gasped.

‘We attack in a day or so, all out, him or us.’

‘Christ, I thought I had problems.’ She coughed out a laugh, then lowered her head, suddenly saddened.

‘They kick you out, babes?’

‘They ... *suggested* I might resign. Knew it was inevitable when they ordered the COBRA meetings without me.’

‘Their loss.’

‘Got home to find the house empty.’

‘Huh?’

Thomas sat next to Johnno, studying Helen.

She softly explained, her eyelids heavy, ‘Mike took Tabitha. Gone.’

‘Gone where?’ Johnno puzzled.

‘Left me. Note from both, don’t want to be in danger. Can’t blame them, they deserve better.’

‘He’s going to divorce you?’

‘Yes. And Tabitha is old enough to stop me knowing where they are.’ She held her head with a hand, starting to sob.

Thomas jumped across and sat next to her. ‘Don’t cry, please. We’ll look after you.’

She lifted her head, a moist smile for the lad and a hand on his shoulder. ‘You’re a good boy. But you can’t fix *this* mess.’

‘When my mum died I was very sad,’ Thomas explained, ‘but then I was sat in my friend’s house and ... I thought I would go to the home for unwanted boys, Johnno walked in – the best secret agent in the whole world. He rescued me, and he can rescue you. He can do anything.’ Helen smiled back at Thomas. He excitedly continued, ‘And now he owns the bank and has all the money in the world.’

Helen made eye contact with Johnno. 'You own the bank?'

'When Beesely fell ill I took control.'

'Not Otto?'

'Nope. He's ... *not*, officially, anyone's son. I am, officially.'

'So you now own everything?' she asked, wide eyed.

'Yep. Overdraft facility is about a trillion or so. Not that I get the time to spend it.'

She studied him carefully for several seconds. 'Your rescue forces in the UK got massive coverage across the world. Before I left hundreds of Swiss Red Cross were landing at Southampton Airport. Big fuss as to why they're helping and the UK Government isn't.'

'I didn't do it to fuck any one off,' Johnno pointed out.

She studied him. 'BUPA hit the headlines as well, lots of awkward questions.'

'That's tough shit. Save lives first, awkward questions later.'

'They arrested the Air Force pilots who dropped your people –'

'For fuck's sake.' He raised his phone. 'Get me Duncan, newspaper man.' He waited.

'Johnno?'

'Yeah, listen up. Beesely is in hospital, stroke, I'm in charge now. Listen, those RAF pilots they arrested, I want massive coverage, praise the pilots, piss-off the MOD. Got that?'

'Yeah, no problem. Most people think that way anyway.'

'Get on it.' He hung up. 'Fuckers.' He stared at her for several seconds. 'You want me to find them?'

'Not now,' she said, lowering her head.

'Any time you do -'

'I know.'

His phone went. 'Yeah?' he barked.

'Susan Hayes, sir.'

Softly he said, 'OK, put her through.'

'Johno?'

'Susan, how goes it?'

'I can't get hold of Helen, tele' says she's resigned -'

'She's here, nestled up to Thomas with a nice white wine.'

'Oh, thank God.'

'And she didn't resign, they forced her out. Fucking scapegoat.'

'Oh ... God. She OK?'

'Nope. Mike and Tabitha done a runner. Listen, she's safe – well, she's here - call tomorrow, yeah?' He hung up.

'She'll be fretting,' Helen suggested without looking up.

'So ... what'll you do now?'

Thomas looked up at her, Helen smiling back down as best she could muster.

'I've always felt kind of welcome and wanted around here, despite everything that has happened. It's like a magical castle ... where you just pick up the phone and what you desire appears. Quite surreal, really.

'When I set-off ... heading here ... I really wanted to chat to Beesely, even though I knew he was ill. Think I just needed to get away. But also part of me wants to go after Luchenkov.'

'That's understandable.'

She coughed out a short laugh. 'Reached the height of my career a week ago. Lost it all in one day – career and family, empty house to come home to. Just a goldfish. Washed up at forty-five.'

'You're not washed up, not yet,' Johno confidently announced. 'I've got a war on two fronts, Luchenkov and Shue, and I need allies. If they're not stopped then thousands more will die. So forgive me for being blunt, but I need you, tomorrow, to get up off your sorry arse and help me, 'cause Beesely is out of action and I need someone who has the kind of brain power I lack.' She stared back, wide

eyed. 'Starting tomorrow, young lady, you're going to start earning your keep, twelve hours a day under hostile fire.'

'I can't work for a foreign government, or similar agency – that's treason, and I'd be shot.'

Johno eased forwards. 'First, they won't know. Second, I'll fix it. I'll fix it so that a hundred witnesses have you sunning yourself in the Caribbean. And any fucker from the UK who enquires ... will be dealt with. Firmly! If we don't want them to know, they fucking won't. Now, if you want to hang out here, you help me win this war, or you piss off back to morbid misery land!'

'Johno!' Thomas barked. 'Don't shout at Helen, she is sad.'

Johno took a breath, focusing on Thomas. 'Remember those talks we had, about what happens when the shooting starts?'

Thomas nodded. 'First, win the engagement. Two, secure the area. Three, treat wounded and evacuate.'

'Good lad. And what stage are we at now?' he pointedly demanded.

'We are fighting?' Thomas ventured.

'Have we won yet?'

Thomas reluctantly shook his head.

'So everyone fights hard, no one slacks till we've won. OK?'

Thomas nodded. 'But please don't shout at Helen.'

'It's OK,' she whispered. 'He's right. First we need to stop the bad men before we worry about other things. Although his bedside manner needs work.'

Johno laughed. 'Thomas, another round if you please. One for yourself or you won't sleep.'

An hour later Thomas had Helen laughing at Johno's antics in the cave complex; Abba glitter balls, his smelly arse and the stitches, Steak the bear and having great fun blowing things up.

When Helen got drowsy, Johnno lifted her up and punched the lift button. Mavo and Blinkey appeared, raised eyebrows at the sleepy and slightly drunk Dame Helen. Tightly squeezed, they headed up to her room, the troopers holding the lift.

In her room the heating was on, a drinks tray on the table, even fresh flowers. Unfortunately, the building work as well under way, the vibrations felt. Helen grabbed a whisky miniature and downed half of it, flopping on the bed. Johnno finished it off before attempting to cover her.

‘No, leave it,’ she mumbled. ‘It’s warm.’

Johnno headed for the door.

‘No, stay,’ she suggested, face in the pillow, her words muffled.

‘Stay?’ he repeated.

‘I don’t want to be alone,’ she said without looking up, reaching out a hand.

Relaxed, but nowhere near drunk - certainly not by his standards - Johnno stepped across and lay on the bed.

‘Leave the light on,’ she mumbled. ‘Sergeant Johnno Williams likes to sleep ... with a light on, ‘cause sometimes he wakes in the dark and panics.’

‘You’ve been reading my file again,’ he whispered, kicking off his shoes. ‘And I snore.’

‘I know. In your file.’ She snuggled up to him, her head into his shoulder.

Johnno opened his eyes. ‘My snoring ... is in my file?’

‘No. I made that up,’ she mumbled into his jacket.

Smiling, he closed his eyes and fell promptly asleep.

Ten minutes later Mavo and Blinkey glanced at each other, sighed and eased back, feet out, arms folded, trying to get comfortable.

Thirty minutes later they again glanced at each other.

‘He’s not?’ Mavo commented.

‘Must be.’
‘He can’t.’
‘She *was* drunk,’ Blinkey pointed out.
‘Still, Dame Helen ... and *him*?’
‘Shocking.’
‘So ... he’s in there ... you know ... and we’re watching the door for ‘im.’
‘Bastard,’ Blinkey softly let out.
‘*Cheeky* bastard.’

2

Otto handed Beesely a tea at 6am, Beesely now propped up with many pillows. ‘You look better.’

‘Much better,’ Beesely enthused. ‘Had a long chat to the head quack in the night about this stroke stuff. Could be released in a day or two.’

Otto seemed horrified at the suggestion. ‘Released?’

‘Yes. All the bad stuff is over, body settling down. No brain damage, at least not the speech centre, just the left side playing up – and *that* is getting a bit better.’

Otto straightened. ‘Better?’

‘I can feel more than I could,’ Beesely said with smile. ‘Had a descent breakfast this morning as well.’

‘No Bavarian Napoleon, I hope!’

Beesely laughed. ‘Scrambled egg, bacon, hash browns...’

Otto looked sceptical as Beesely sipped his tea.

‘So, what news?’

‘No attack last night. Repairs are progressing.’

‘Good. How’s Johnno handling things?’

‘Very well. Apart from his conference call with the American Secretary of Defense.’

Beesely’s eyebrows shot up. ‘What did *he* want?’

‘Yesterday NATO went to Def Con Three in response to the sinking of the Ark Royal.’

‘I can imagine.’

‘The White House Situation Room organised a video conference with Johno.’

Beesely rolled his eyes. ‘Christ, that can’t have been good for us.’

‘Yes ... and no. Mr. Stanton was hoping that Johno would give them a *hard time*, as you say, so that they have an excuse not to get involved with the nuclear bombs in Austria. A shift of blame.’

‘Yes, straight onto our shoulders. Johno walked straight into that one. And I’m surprised Olly allowed it.’

‘*He* set it up.’

‘Really?’ Beesely queried, a scowl forming. ‘Well, I’ll have a word at some point.’

‘We are preparing a large scale assault on the castle of Johan Shue in Austria.’

‘Good, need to get those nukes. Europeans have enough on their plates at the moment.’

‘That’s exactly what Johno said,’ Otto flatly pointed out. ‘He is more like you than you realise.’

‘No need to be rude, Otto.’ They chuckled. ‘Get me the details of the attack plan.’

‘There is a full meeting of all managers at 8am. But, Johno is still asleep. As is ... Dame Helen.’

‘Helen is here?’

Otto saddened quickly. ‘They forced her out.’

‘They ... who?’

‘She was forced to resign.’

Beesely turned away. ‘Took the blame for the attacks,’ he said with venom. ‘Bloody politicians!’

‘There is another ... *interesting* development.’ Beesely turned his head back to Otto. ‘She ... and Johno ... spent the night together.’

Beesely’s eyes widened. ‘They what?’ he whispered. Otto confirmed with a slight nod, Beesely staring ahead. ‘Bloody hell.’

Otto tipped his head, an acknowledgment and agreement with that sentiment. 'She had been drinking, and was very upset - not least because her husband and daughter have left her.'

'Left her?'

'According to Thomas they no longer wish to be in danger, the daughter old enough to block access by Helen.'

'Oh ... no,' Beesely whispered, lying back and breathing out loudly, Otto supporting Beesely's teacup.

'Thomas explained this to me this morning. And, something else. Johno shouted at Helen, told her that if she is in the castle ... she helps us and fights.'

Beesely focused on Otto, starting to nod his head. 'He did it deliberately'

'Did ... *it*?'

'He's helping her. And he knows a lot about grief counselling. Despite what he would admit to he's read probably a hundred books on the subject. He could give Doc' Manning a run for his money.'

The door opened and a doctor in a white coat entered, sat in a motorised wheelchair.

'Ah, the new wheels are here,' Beesely enthused.

Otto stood and stared at the motorised wheelchair as the doctor went around in circles, backwards and forwards, all manoeuvred by a small joystick on the right hand armrest.

'Right hand drive,' Beesely pointed out. 'Top speed, ten miles per hour. Available in just the one colour.'

The doctor jumped out and Otto tried the chair.

'Don't scratch it, Otto, you're not on my insurance policy.'

3

The sounds of, and vibrations from, heavy equipment woke Johno. The curtains were drawn, but the sun forced its way through a crack. Turning his head he found Helen asleep,

still fully clothed. Easing up slowly he stood and stretched his back, glancing out of the window.

‘Survived another night,’ he muttered.

‘Charming! I am that dangerous?’ she asked, pushing herself upright.

‘You look rough.’ He put a cigarette on his lip.

‘Johno, when you wake next to a lady you are supposed to say something nice and complimentary. *You look rough* generally doesn’t get you a second date.’ She joined him at the window.

Johno laughed, lifting the table phone. Croaking and with a dry mouth he said, ‘Two teas, breakfast for me, European breakfast for Dame Helen. And get Helen an assortment of fresh clothes.’ He placed the phone down, making himself a warm Vodka Red Bull from the drink’s tray as she peered out of the window.

She ran her hands through her hair, trying to fix it. ‘Didn’t really see the damage last night when I drove in. God, it’s like a builder’s yard down there. Who are the soldiers in blue?’

‘Swiss Army, lending a hand.’

She glanced skyward as an Apache flew slowly by then grabbed his drink and downed a mouthful. ‘I going to shower.’

Grabbing her unpacked case she dragged it into the bathroom. ‘And no smoking in my room!’ she shouted from beyond the bathroom door.

Johno stuck his head out of the main door, checking both ways. In the lift he noticed two troopers, but not Mavo and Blinkey, sat on the chairs. They folded their arms and stared back.

Johno sat tucking into a stale doughnut as Helen emerged from the bathroom, pale grey tracksuit bottoms and a t-shirt, wet hair combed straight back.

She sat immediately and grabbed her mint tea. ‘Ah, you remembered.’

‘Mint tea? Yep, I had one in Jerusalem not long ago.’ He tried hard not to notice the prominent nipples sticking through the t-shirt.

‘When you went to visit Rudenson?’

Johno nodded as he chewed. A knock at the door and he wheeled in a breakfast trolley, thanking the lady who had brought it. ‘Not quite sure what you like, so help yourself.’ He placed down his English breakfast, Helen immediately pinching a piece of crispy bacon. ‘Sleep alright?’

‘Out like a light,’ she responded. ‘Didn’t even hear you snoring.’

‘So how do you know I snore, then?’

‘You’re snoring is legendary.’ She sipped her tea.

‘That’s not going to get you a second date, young lady. As Beesely might say, your bedside manner needs work.’

She smiled. ‘The people here, they’re going to gossip.’

‘Do you care?’

She glanced out the window. ‘Would have done a day ago.’

‘And now?’ he gently probed.

With her gaze held firmly on the lake she answered, ‘Now I’m useless ... a washed up old bag that no one gives a damn about.’

‘That’s not true,’ Johno quietly stated. ‘Just ‘cause the wankers in the UK don’t appreciate you don’t mean you’re no good. People been writing me off for years –’

‘And now you’re worth more than everyone in the UK combined.’

‘See, so there’s always hope,’ he pressed with firm eye contact. ‘Something’ll turn up. One door closes, another opens.’

‘Trick is, not getting smacked in the face when it swings.’

Johno laughed. ‘It’s caught me a few times.’

A knock at the door and a wheeled clothes stand was pushed in and left; ladies suits.

‘Christ,’ she muttered as she examined them. ‘These are all top of the range, five ... six hundred pounds a piece.’

‘The boss man is rich,’ Johnno said with a wink. ‘Listen, we got a big pow-wow in an hour, or less, and I need a strategy. So sit your arse down and put your thinking cap on.’

‘What’s the meeting about?’ she asked as she sat.

‘How to deal with the nukes in Austria.’

‘OK, what’s your gut feeling?’ She nibbled on a bagel.

‘This guy likes art, old Nazi stolen art by the sounds of it, so he’s more about money than anything else. He’s eighty-two years old, so probably a bit cranky in the head.’

‘No clues as to what he wants the nukes for?’

‘None. My guess is to sell them. If he’s into art, it’s about the money, not politics.’ He tucked into his eggs.

‘You’ve got the Amber Panels,’ she pointed out.

‘My idea exactly. Don’t have the spear any more, so I figured I’d stuff a car full of priceless treasures, drive up and have a chat. Tell him I’ve left K2 and nicked the stuff, try and sell the panels to him.’

‘Then what?’ she asked as she chewed.

‘It gives me twenty-four hours to poke around and come up with something before the yanks carpet bomb the place.’

She snapped her head up. ‘They’ll bomb?’

‘Hell, yes,’ Johnno firmly emphasised. ‘They ain’t going to risk those nukes getting out!’

She stared, wide eyed. ‘And when they bomb you’ll be... where, exactly?’

‘Inside,’ he teased, a wicked grin.

‘And ... don’t you see a slight flaw in that plan?’ she asked, a scowl forming.

‘The place is full of caves, so I aim to be in one, disarming the nukes when the attack begins.’

‘There’re a lot of variables there. A lot of things that could go wrong.’

‘Someone has to get inside, see what’s going on and open the back door. This guy’s castle is impregnable - only way to deal with it is to bomb the hell out of it. One good thing in our favour is the isolation. If they go pop, no one will get hurt.’

‘Except your good self.’

‘Price to pay.’ His features hardened. ‘I’m not sending anyone else in. I’ve buried enough people lately.

She silently ate her breakfast.

Thirty minutes later Johnno wandered into the corridor, Helen picking out a new suit. The troopers did not look pleased.

‘Sleep well?’ one asked.

‘Comfortable ... *bed*, was it?’ the second man asked.

Johnno stopped and stared. ‘Didn’t sit on them *uncomfortable* chairs all night, did you?’

The troopers stood. ‘Just the last four hours, since we came on,’ the first trooper complained.

His buddy added, ‘Seems someone needed some *protection*, although I’m wondering know just what kind of *protection* was used.’

Johnno forced a sadistic smile. ‘Guys, there’s only one thing to keep in mind.’ He closed to a confidential distance. Whispering he said, ‘I ... decide on pay rises and bonuses.’

The troopers glanced at each other.

‘Now push the button,’ Johnno said.

‘It ain’t working.’

‘No?’ Johnno queried.

‘They started working on the roof last night, had to disable the lift.’

‘C’mon then. Stairs.’ Johnno led the way, protection in tow. ‘After all that sitting down, you can exercise the haemorrhoids.’

The foyer carpet had been ripped up, dozens of builders moving back and forth. The Great Hall bustled; guards, managers, Swiss Army officers and the American decontamination team from Germany.

In the courtyard Johno spotted Mr. Grey and the Captain walking in, stepping up to them and lighting up. 'Captain,' he said, shaking the man's hand.

'Heard some of your own guys tried to kill you,' the Captain asked, a concerned look.

'Infiltrators,' Johno commented.

'Hah!' Grey let out. 'Probably just pissed them off, or fucked their wives.'

Johno grinned. 'If only.'

Grey pointed up. 'Something going on?'

'On the roof? Building work,' Johno commented, maintaining a straight face.

'How about two floors below the roof?' Grey asked. 'Anything *going on* there?'

The Captain was lost, glancing from face to face.

'What went on, was some silly sod sleeping in a chair all night,' Johno pointedly remarked, leaning forwards. 'Anyway, what's happening in the cave?'

'All sorted,' the Captain suggested. 'Casings moved aside, covered in concrete and then lead. We spray-concreted the walls around the first fifty yards of tunnel, no radiation after that.'

'So how far back does it go?' Johno asked as dozens of men filed past.

'Right through the mountain,' Grey explained. 'Splits left and right, one lower level, old tin mine – five hundred years old. We broke through the far side in two places, comes out not far from the road.'

'I know the road, that's three kilometres away!'

'Two kilometres straight through,' the Captain suggested. 'Large cavern in there, natural by the look of it.'

'And the lower level?'

‘Flooded,’ Grey informed him, thumbing over his shoulder at the lake. ‘Same level as the lake I reckon.’

Johno took a drag, nodding at troopers as they passed. ‘Get some divers in there. I don’t want any surprises. Any radiation trail?’

‘None,’ Grey adamantly replied. ‘Nukes came in through the front door, sealed up after, at least thirty years.’

‘Thirty years!’ Johno repeated.

‘They could’ve been taken out before this place was up to speed,’ Grey suggested.

‘Gunter moved in here 1965,’ Johno pointed out as he thought.

‘Timeline fits,’ Grey admitted.

Johno took a drag. ‘Where’d you kip last night?’

That question caused the two Americans to smile. ‘Up in the Spa,’ the Captain informed him. ‘All the extras thrown in – massages, ladies, room service with a smile!’

‘Least we can do,’ Johno said. ‘You enjoy yourselves. Oh, Grey, you’re a ... *diver* aren’t you?’

‘Yep. And I love cave diving.’

Johno lifted his eyebrows and leant closer. ‘Go play, then.’

A bright new day

1

In the bright light of the drawbridge Johno stopped to survey the scene; hundreds of men, dozens of vehicles, two large cranes hoisting packs up to the roof, a dozen builders visible on the roof in their yellow hard hats. Then he noticed the climbers on the cliff face, nestled around the hole made by the cruise missile. He raised his phone. 'Put me through to the climbers on the cliff.'

'Moment, sir.'

He waited.

'Hallo?' came a strained voice

'This is Johno. Is there any danger of further rock falls?'

'Some, sir. We are securing the rocks now with wire netting and bolts, some rocks to fall down. It will need a large and permanent wire mesh, sir.'

'No problem, get it sorted.'

'Sir, there is a cave here. We are opening it up now, sir.'

'A cave?'

'Yes, sir, we can see it through the cracks.'

'If it joins up down below, be one hell of a firing position.'

'Yes, sir. Inside we can see some metal.'

'Get the Geiger counters up there now! Pull back!'

'Yes, sir.'

Johno pressed red followed by green. 'Mister Grey to the drawbridge, on the double!' He waited as Grey and the Captain jogged out a few seconds later.

'What's up?' Grey asked.

Johno pointed. 'They found a cave, something metal in it.'

'Up there?' Grey challenged. 'That new cave doesn't go up.'

‘The tunnel in the kitchen is quite high up,’ Johno pointed out with a shrug.

‘That’s another fifty metres higher again,’ the Captain noted, a hand over his eyes.

‘Climb up and have a look, will ya?’ Joho requested.

‘Hell no,’ Grey responded. ‘I’ll abseil down. Quicker.’

* * *

Johno stood in the tank room, now cavernous and echoing without the prior memorabilia. Lights had been rigged up and they now snaked along the walls, brightly illuminating the chamber and its grey concrete surfaces. He lit up again and took in the enclosure as bio-suited men came and went from the hole. Simon’s assistant approached.

‘Any word on Simon?’ Johno enquired.

‘He is doing well, sir. The arm should be useable after, but they have removed a section of ... how you say, *colon*?’

‘That’s not a problem. I’ve had two sections removed and look at me, handsome as ever.’

The guard tipped his eyebrows, questioning the accuracy of statement.

‘Are there guards at the far end of the caves?’

‘Yes, sir. Outside and inside.’

‘I want strong metal gates installed inside, at more than one point. Those caves open here, and this connects right to the top of the fucking command centre.’

‘New door, sir,’ the guard pointed out.

Johno stepped towards it, noticing now the strong metal door.

‘Bolted from the inside, sir. Always two guards. Also, the small room above your office has a new metal door, locked.’

Johno nodded as he led the man towards the new ‘hole-in-the-wall’, as a hastily hung sign labelled it. ‘Have the experts checked the cave? No chance of a cave in?’

‘Yesterday, sir. They are coming back today. All seems OK.’

‘I want every inch searched for secret passages, Geiger counters on everyone.’

‘We have found one hollow wall, they are examining it now.’

Johno took a slow drag. ‘They just discovered another cave in the cliff face where the missile hit.’

The guard’s eyes widened. ‘So high?’

Johno nodded, slowly exhaling. ‘Let’s hope your hollow wall goes up.’

2

After a shower and change of clothes Johno wandered into his new office, the two troopers stood guard outside. It was 7.50am. Claus appeared with a fresh coffee and placed it down.

‘Thanks. All the troops here?’

‘Arriving now, sir.’

‘Search them all, no guns in here.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Mathius stepped in, briefcase in hand, Johno standing. ‘How you doing, mate?’ Johno said with a handshake.

‘Good, sir. I saw Herr Beesely this morning, he is well.’

‘How’re things at the bank?’

‘Fine, sir.’

Johno sat. ‘What I meant was, how have things *here* ... affected people at the bank.’

‘As with *all* Swiss, they are outraged at the attack, sir,’ Mathius stated as he sat.

Johno eased back, thinking for a moment. ‘Do they blame K2?’

Mathius puzzled that question. ‘No, sir.’

‘Be honest. Do any of the staff desire a ... quieter life?’

‘The bank, sir, is ... isolated from affairs here.’

‘They all know each other, so there must be some concern,’ Johno pressed.

‘Concern, yes, dissent, no.’ Mathius stared back. ‘Was there a particular concern you had, sir?’

‘No,’ Johno responded, letting out a long breath out. ‘I’m just concerned that people in the group might be affected by everything that has happened here recently.’

‘There greatest concern has been the infiltration, sir, by Herr Shue.’

‘That’ll be dealt with quickly,’ Johno assured him. ‘I took a long walk around this morning ... and no one tried to kill me.’

‘An ... *interesting* technique, sir.’

Johno smiled. ‘But effective!’ Mathius tipped his head in agreement as managers appeared. Johno stood. ‘Claus, I want chairs grouped by division. K2 in front of me, others to the right, guard commanders to the left.’ Chairs were arranged as requested, more brought in.

Otto wandered slowly in, hands clasped behind his back. He grabbed a chair and placed it to the rear and left of Johno, facing the group. Noticing that movement, Johno ordered Claus to put his chair next to Otto’s, but further left – so that he remained in line of sight, as well as sitting close by.

Many of the guard commanders sat on the cabinet, some stood as the room filled up. All had their jackets removed after being searched.

Off to the right sat the managers of other divisions; investments, client security, security guard division, travel and staff welfare division, casino security division; the room neared its capacity as several trays of refreshments were wheeled in and handed out. Johno fiddled with the air conditioning controls till cool air blew, the door left open.

Last to arrive was Dame Helen, warmly greeted by Otto and Claus. She was asked to sit off to Johno’s right, some

odd looks at her presence in this meeting. Finally the room fell quiet.

‘OK,’ Johno began, surveying the attendant warm bodies, ‘all our enemies need ... is one good grenade and the whole groups is gone.’

The assembled group laughed politely, people glancing around at each other.

‘OK,’ Johno began again. ‘To re-cap where we are ... Herr Director, Sir Morris Beesely, has had a stroke, but is recovering well and will survive a few more years. Unfortunately for you lot his condition activated an incapacity will, and now you’re stuck with me till he gets back.’

The group laughed, sedate and controlled Swiss laughter.

‘Ownership passed to me, because – as most of you know – he is my father, something we kept hidden so that the bad guys out there would not wish to use me as leverage, should I be kidnapped.’ He sighed. ‘Past history. To business. First ... group business. As owner of the group I hereby appoint Otto as Group Managing Director, taking over that role from Beesely.’

A quick glance at Otto confirmed his surprise. Johno continued, ‘But Beesely will continue to be addressed as ‘Herr Director’ and all of his requests will be carried out as if he was still director, when he returns.

‘As part of Otto’s new role he will be spending more time with the financial divisions and over-viewing the other divisions, outside of K2. I would expect Otto to spend little more than two or three days a week here, more of his time in Zurich, which – with a baby on the way – will probably be welcome.’ He made eye contact with Claus. ‘You have that staff list I asked for?’

Claus handed over the list; managers in sequence by rank, all Grade Three at the top, fifteen of them, then Grade Two onwards down. The majority of the Grade Three

managers worked at K2, the rest of the divisions having one each, five in total not including Mathius.

‘Calculator?’ Johno asked, still studying the list. He punched in numbers and scribbled down figures.

‘Something we can help with?’ Otto offered.

‘Nope,’ Johno said without looking up, Claus, Mathius and Otto exchanging looks.

Finally he was ready. ‘OK.’ He took in their faces. ‘I have always believed that people should have an interest in their work, and by that I mean a financial interest in the company they work for – like a family firm.

‘So, as the owner of the bank I will be splitting the share capital of the group and issuing some share capital, as of today, to the people who run the group. Otto, you will be receiving seven percent of the group equity.’

Otto blinked.

‘Mathius, five percent, Claus, three percent, all remaining Grade Three managers will be getting one percent. Since I understand that dividend payments are taxed at a lower rate than normal wages you will all now be paid by quarterly dividend.’

Stunned faces stared back at him.

‘You will, however, be required to sign a document that signs those shares back over to the bank in cases of ... breach of trust, treachery and the like. K2 must OK the sale of the stock, who it’s sold to, and none of you can sell anything for at least five years.’

‘Sir,’ Claus called, easing forwards. ‘One percent of the bank is worth more than five million pounds?’

‘Then you fuckers won’t object to buying me a drink once in a while, will you?’

They stared back in stunned silence, some glancing at each other.

‘Are you sure, sir?’ Claus pressed.

‘Positive. Action it today.’

The managers off to the right sat mesmerized. They had just received a million pound handout, plus dividends.

‘That all adds up to thirty two percent?’ Johnno asked.

‘Thirty, sir,’ Claus corrected.

Johnno nodded. ‘Right, group business, point two.’ They waited on his every word. ‘This is what I want. I want us to buy a small hotel in every major town in Europe, perhaps a hundred in total. The hotels should be a reasonable investment, but also discreetly placed and with easy access from several entrances. I then want to buy two or three small detective agencies in each town, plus a small taxi firm in the same way. I then want the hotels to be used by the public, but one floor reserved for just K2 agents, the detectives making use of the taxi driver’s local knowledge.

‘One or two K2 agents are to be housed there all the time, the hotel manager someone we recruit and trust. These hotels are to be the focal point of intelligence gathering in each town, making use obviously of the knowledge of the local taxi drivers and detectives.

‘I want all three groups to be run at a profit, the detectives fully employed on commercial work – but used by us when they’re needed.

‘If we had such a place up and running in Burgas, Bulgaria, then we could have made use of them much quicker.’ He sipped his coffee.

‘Sir,’ a manager called from the right. ‘We already have many detective agencies we use in this way.’

‘I know, but I want a blanket spread – right across Europe, fill the gaps. Yeah?’

‘Yes, sir,’ the man said with a nod.

‘OK, that’s the group business for now. All non-K2 staff can now return to ... wherever you guys hang out.’ The managers who had been sat to his right stood and filed out, still stunned. Johnno pointed at the guard commanders, who now stood. ‘Grab some seats lads.’ They bustled past the

front of the desk and sat. 'OK. K2 business. First, where are we with Luchenkov?'

'No sign in Bulgaria, sir,' a manager answered. 'But the Americans stopped his boat last night.'

Johnno's eyes widened. 'They have him?'

'No, sir, he was not on the boat.'

'But it belonged to him?'

'Some of his family members were on it, some possessions.'

'And where is it now, this boat?'

'They let it go, sir.'

'Let it go! He could have been hidden somewhere on board!'

'No, sir. The US Marines spent two hours on board, everything was checked.'

Johnno eased back. 'So, he used it to get his family out and he got on another boat, off that one.'

'Yes, sir. We are still looking at boats passing through the Straits –'

'Too late now.' Johnno checked his watch, half an hour to the video conference. He jabbed at the desk phone. 'See if Mr. Stanton is awake.'

'Yes, sir.'

He waited, a fresh coffee brought in. The screen had been moved back, but now burst into life. Otto and Claus grabbed it, wheeling it around.

'You see me, Johnno?' Mr. Stanton asked.

'Yeah, loud and clear. Listen, that boat you stopped and searched—'

'Off the coast of Turkey,' Stanton cut in.

'We want to track it.'

'There's a hidden satellite tracker on board. It's heading due south, towards the Suez Canal.'

'If it stops for a while, mid ocean, let me know.'

'Why ... in particular?'

‘Did your lads search it thoroughly?’ Johno asked, staring ahead, not at the screen.

‘Yes. Why?’

‘So, you can be sure he’s not on it then?’ Johno asked, still not facing the screen.

‘What are you getting at, Johno?’

‘Well, where’s the safest place on the planet for him to be right now?’

‘A boat that has already been searched?’

Now Johno turned to the screen. ‘He’s on another boat, so he’ll hop over to that one knowing that *you know* it’s already been searched.’

‘Had your coffee this morning, then,’ Stanton remarked with a smile.

‘How are the puppies?’

‘Got rid of all but one, growing like an alien. But at least this one doesn’t shed its skin or try and eat me - much. You got your strategy together?’

‘Yep. Make it up as I go along.’

‘You’re starting to sound like Beesely!’

‘So long as I don’t start looking like him!’

‘Is that ... Dame Helen with you?’ She leant forwards and waved. ‘Hello Helen,’ Mr. Stanton offered, his tone clearly indicating he was concerned about something.

‘Something on your mind, Mr. Stanton?’ Johno asked.

‘Helens’ presence in K2 may cause you ... problems with the UK Government.’

‘The UK Government has enough to worry about. She’s helping me, because Beesely’s not here ... and I’m a bit thick.’

‘Helen’s presence there will, most definitely, turn the UK Government ... and the British Intelligence Services... against you.’

‘That’s their loss,’ Johno firmly pointed out. ‘Since we’re far more valuable to them than they are to us. But you

just reminded me of something. Otto, please remain, everyone else, ten minute break.'

Johnno waited as they filed out, sipping his coffee. Otto moved to the front of the desk, where he could be viewed. At the American end it appeared as if Stanton sat alone. Finally the office door closed.

'What's on your mind, Johnno?'

'I'd like some advice.'

'On what?'

'The British Prime Minister.'

'In what sense?'

'I had a notion to try and remove him, get him a shit load of bad publicity. But that's not something I would do without checking with you guys first.'

Stanton stared back for several seconds. 'Why, in particular, would you desire him gone?'

'Because this mess is his fault!'

'How so?'

'He knew about Luchenkov weeks ago, after the dirty bomb attack, and he did fuck all about it. No pressure on the Russians, no attempt to try and kill him in prison, no attempt to remove his money and businesses. He allowed himself to be pressured by the Europeans, all desperate because of the gas pipeline and their fucking energy needs.'

'You saying that if he acted sooner –'

'I'm saying that he put the economics of Europe ahead of the security of Britain! He was playing politician with people's lives, and now the economic fall-out of this will be far worse than a gas pipeline problem.'

Stanton took several seconds. 'We agree,' he quietly stated, Otto straightening in his chair.

'You do?' Johnno asked.

'Yes. So, how would you remove him?'

'Let the press know that he knew about the threat.'

'But then the UK population would be against the Russians –'

‘I have an idea there as well. That money that BUPA got, we can say it was a Russian billionaire who gave the money. That way ... mixed feelings in the UK, and we’ll run some favourable stories on the Russians. Besides, about time I tried to stick some Amber Panels up some Russian arse.’

‘You’ll use them as leverage?’

‘Try to.’

‘If you’re asking for our blessing, Johno, you have it.’ Stanton hit a button and the screen altered, revealing fifty men in a room.

‘Shit,’ Johno let out. Then louder, ‘Sorry for keeping you up all night guys.’ He waved. Otto stood, as if these men had entered the room.

Stanton addressed the group. ‘All in favour please raise your hands.’ The group raised their hands. Johno and Otto made eye contact, wondering what was going on. ‘Those opposed?’ Stanton called. No one raised a hand.

‘That the vote on the British Prime Minister?’ Johno asked.

‘No, that was the vote on accepting *you* into the Lodge.’

Johno stood. ‘Me? You mad?’

Many of the men laughed.

‘We’ll talk about it again soon, the clock is ticking and some other gentlemen are up late.’

‘Hopkins?’

‘Hoskins,’ Stanton corrected. ‘We’ll be watching.’ He waved then cut the line.

‘You are now Lodge,’ Otto stated, clearly shocked, and sounding a little jealous.

Johno opened the door, waving managers back in. Sitting he said, ‘Yeah, well wait till I fuck up a few things, they’ll soon kick me out.’

The managers filed back in.

‘You have only fifteen minutes,’ Otto pointed out.

‘Yanks have been up all night, so let them have a coffee and wait. Fuck ‘em!’ The group settled. ‘OK, first things first. Golf.’

‘Golf?’ Claus repeated.

‘Yeah. Does K2 have its own golf course?’

‘No, sir,’ Claus answered, clearly perplexed.

‘Right, that land opposite the West Gate, those trees. Who owns it?’

‘The local council,’ Otto informed him. ‘The trees are harvested every fifteen years, I believe.’

‘Right, I want to buy a section of it immediately. Three hundred metres wide along the road, one kilometre long, following the road opposite the West Gate.’

Managers took notes.

‘To build a golf course?’ Otto puzzled.

‘And golf house. A *lodge*, I believe they’re called. I want one of the world’s best designers to make it a proper course. Now, anyone want to tell me why that ... is a clever idea?’

Managers glanced at each other. A lady manager raised her pen. ‘If there is a golf course to the west, it will be more difficult for attackers to approach unseen.’

Johno pointed directly at her. ‘Well done, you win a cookie.’

The managers collectively sighed, smiled and took notes.

‘OK, next - the tank room. That room is big enough for a two storey guard barracks and offices. So, ladies and gentlemen, we’re moving indoors.

‘I want that space converted – as fast as possible – into an underground guard centre, complete with barrack rooms, showers, cafeteria and offices for guard commanders.’ Notes were taken. Johno faced the guard commanders. ‘You’ve seen the space. How many men do you reckon could sleep in there?’

‘Two hundred,’ a man suggested.

‘More,’ another suggested.

Johno faced the managers. 'When that room is ready, I want the buildings vacated in the East Camp to be pulled down, grassed over and trees planted on top.

'Next, the office block to the west of the castle. I want all staff moved out of there by next week, find offices in Zug or Zurich. I *will not* ... have admin' staff working there when this place could be bombed. They're vulnerable, so it goes! Nothing left but grass.

'Right - the caves. The new caves, that is. They go a long way back and I want to make use of them. When we've finished checking them and making safe I want them concrete lined, the cavern that's in there made into an ... indoor range or something, some guard quarters. If there's stuff stored outside, that we can store in there, then do so, please.

'OK, here,' he swivelled and pointed at the roof in the corner. 'Open up a hole *there* and put in a spiral staircase. That little room above us here I want decorated and turned into a very comfortable habitation, two beds in there, shower area, toilets, etc. Then I want the tunnel that leads up and around to be decorated nicely, lights, heaters, usual bollocks. Next - trees.'

'Trees?' Otto repeated.

Johno nodded. 'I want to buy a hundred trees, fully grown, suitable obviously for Swiss winters, around six metres tall, but with no branches below two metres. I want them lining the camp roads and next to all gates and buildings remaining outside, many next to castle, tallest we can find. From the cliff I want hanging baskets -'

'What are they?' Claus asked.

'I want metal baskets with soil in, hung up around the cliff face, with small shrubs growing out of them. Anyone want to tell me why ... all this?'

Dame Helen answered, 'Because from the air this place is distinctive.'

'Correct.'

The managers collectively understood and made notes.

‘You are camouflaging the facility,’ Otto noted.

Johno offered Otto a serious stare. ‘Any future bombs *will not* cause damage. Certainly not large scale loss of life.’

‘It’s time,’ Otto put in, checking his watch.

‘I’m not ready, they’ll have to wait a bit.’ He faced the guard commanders. ‘You’ve seen the photos of this place in Austria?’ They acknowledged with quick head tips. ‘Can you get in?’

‘There is a blind spot we can climb,’ a man suggested. ‘Directly under the bridge entrance.’

‘Have we located the cave exits?’

‘Five so far,’ the same man explained. ‘Three new locations came from the satellite thermal images. They are warm on the images, so there must be heaters inside.’

‘Heaters inside?’ Johno repeated, giving it some thought. ‘So ... people working in there?’ The commanders agreed. ‘How many guards does Shue have?’

‘Perhaps thirty,’ Otto answered. ‘But no indication of heavy weapons - mostly pistols, some hunting rifles.’

Johno pointed at the commander of ‘A’ Squadron. ‘Can you assault from the road.’

‘If they know we are coming they could pin us down to the road approaches. The gatehouse will have to be taken first, and silently. If we get to the crest of the ridge opposite the castle we can keep them pinned down. 66mm will take out the drawbridge and windows, sniper rifles can pin down any resistance as we enter.’

Johno pointed at the next man, commander of ‘B’ Squadron. ‘Caves easy enough?’

‘If they are not wired or booby-trapped, they are easy access.’

Johno eased back. ‘How long to climb up to the castle, enter quietly and take the drawbridge?’

‘Two or three hours from the base, at least an hour to move from the nearest access road to the base. That access road will have to be secured first.’

‘Do you have a detailed plan?’ Otto delicately enquired.

‘Yes. Make it up as I go along,’ Johnno said with a smile and a wink.

‘Sir?’ came from the phone.

‘Yeah?’

‘The American Secretary is calling.’

‘OK, put them on.’ He swivelled his chair as the blue screen flickered into a view of the same situation room.

‘So, up early or staying up late?’ Johnno asked,

‘A bit of both, I guess,’ Hoskins responded. ‘I caught a few hours earlier.’

‘We’ve worked out a plan of attack, detailed and precise, as you would expect from the Swiss.’

Otto and Claus glanced at each other from under their eyebrows.

‘And can you *share* ... this plan over this *secure* link?’

‘Of course. At least the broad strokes, as you guys say.’

‘I think that it’s an old English saying, actually,’ Hoskins corrected.

Johnno smiled. ‘OK. Got a pen and paper? Twelve-noon day after tomorrow is what ... ‘zero hour’ I guess we can call it. If we haven’t secured the nukes by then you level the place, then send in any forces you may have on standby to mop up. That’s Central European Time, guys - I’d hate you to be early.’ A few of the Generals smiled. Johnno continued, ‘Our people will move in by stealth before that, hoping to have the situation dealt with. If not, I’d like a fly by at 11.30am on the dot, a very loud fly-by, to let them know what’s about to hit them. At 11am our helicopters are going to fly by with a similar effect, adding to my hand in the negotiations.’

‘Negotiations?’ Hoskins repeated.

‘Yep. Tomorrow morning I’ll be driving there to chat to the guy, giving myself twenty-four hours to talk him round.’

‘You’re going to talk to him?’ Hoskins asked, surprised and confused.

‘We have something he wants. Should get me through the door, he might even swap it for the nukes. I’ll make an assessment then.’

‘You think that’s a possibility?’ Hoskins pressed.

‘With what I have to offer it’s a distinct possibility. He likes shiny trinkets and we got a shit load in the back room under the sofa.’

‘And if he doesn’t play ball?’ Hoskins asked.

‘He’ll shoot me.’

‘Is it ... *wise*, that you go in there yourself?’

‘Don’t know anyone better suited, or as handsome. I have all the skills that this jobs needs, in particular the charm, charisma ... and the balls to knock on his door and convince him about something.’

‘Something you’re *not* going to share with us?’

‘Absolutely not. It would take all the fun out of our new relationship. I don’t do anything till the third date!’

The generals laughed.

‘And if you are still inside at zero-hour?’ Hoskins pointedly asked.

‘You go right ahead and flatten the place, don’t worry about me.’

‘And what about the Austrian authorities?’

‘I’ll be dealing with them first thing in the morning, can’t risk tipping them off before then.’

‘And will we, tomorrow, be getting formal agreement from the Austrians?’ Hoskins asked.

‘Bloody well hope so. If not, K2 invade Austria and we all go to jail!’

‘When do you expect the diplomatic process to start?’

‘Exactly this time tomorrow. And I’d appreciate it if you would contain this till then. Any sniff of a leak and the nukes may go bang, albeit in a remote mountainous valley.’

‘The two nukes in question, lost off Sicily,’ Hoskins explained, ‘are low yield. If they are the same ones.’

‘So we’re lucky in where they are,’ Johno suggested. ‘Good containment.’

‘We’ve had our 747 circling that part of Europe. So far, nothing,’ Hoskins reported.

‘We’ve got a lot going for us,’ Johno suggested. ‘Low yield nukes, in a cave, in an isolated area. The Gods are smiling down on us. Or as someone said to me yesterday, *espírito christo*, right before he tried to shoot me.’

‘Tried to shoot you?’ Hoskins asked.

‘Some of Herr Shue’s guys infiltrated K2 years ago. Got activated and came after me.’

‘He knows you’re coming?’

‘Yep. But not *why*, or my ace in the hole. Listen, I’ll let you guys get to bed,’ Joho loudly offered. ‘Same time tomorrow.’

‘We’ll have everything in place by then. Goodnight’

‘Good morning!’ Johno said with a wave.

* * *

Mr. Stanton turned to his deputy, a horrified look. ‘Send a message to Mister Grey. Let Johno know who’s trying to kill him.’

* * *

‘You’re going in there alone?’ Dame Helen asked.

He faced her. ‘Nope, Thomas will be with me.’

Her eyes widened. ‘You’re taking Thomas in there?’ she barked.

‘Calm down, his rule, not mine. Just like in the cave –’

‘One in danger, both in danger,’ Otto stated.

Helen focused on Otto. ‘What?’

Otto explained, ‘Thomas was left alone when his mother was killed. He is... *determined* not to be left alone if Johnno is killed. He would rather ... die.’

‘He’s too young to make that choice for himself!’ she barked.

Johnno offered her two soothing palms. ‘You take it up with the short-arse. If you can persuade him, fine, I’ll go alone.’

She took a breath and eased back. ‘And *you* shouldn’t be going in there alone either!’

‘It’s nice you care. But I have a plan, a very cunning plan, if I say so myself. So ... trust me, I’ll be back. Or irradiated. Or shot. Maybe thrown off the cliff—’

The guard commanders laughed, scowled at by Helen.

‘Sir!’ burst from the phone with some urgency.

‘Yeah?’

‘Sir, Mister Grey says he must talk with you urgently at the drawbridge. He is climbing down.’

‘Oh hell,’ Johnno muttered. Then louder and towards the phone, ‘OK!’ He stood. ‘Wait here guys. We found another cave, this one half way up the fucking cliff face and Grey’s just found something in it.’ He headed towards the door.

At the drawbridge he met Mr. Grey stood in climbing gear, immediately motioned towards the grass.

‘What did you find?’ Johnno asked.

‘What? Oh, the cave, nothing yet, still making the hole bigger.’

‘What’s the fuss then?’ Johnno barked.

‘Something else,’ Grey suggested eyeing the guards in the compound. ‘Mister Stanton knows who’s been trying to kill you. Who’s *really* behind it.’ Johnno waited, confused. ‘Vatican Security.’

Johnno stared back at Grey. Then blinked. ‘You what?’

‘Mister Stanton believes that the Nazis grabbed some church relics during the war –’

‘And Gunter got them?’

Grey nodded. ‘Along with his good buddy, Mr. Shue, who loves religious art and relics by all accounts.’

‘There was no religious junk in the memorabilia room here, was there?’

‘The spearhead!’ Grey pointedly reminded Johnno.

Johnno took a deep breath and stared out over the lake. ‘Yeah, could see how that would piss them off. But I haven’t heard of them kicking down the door of that Austrian museum to get the other one.’

Grey suggested, ‘Maybe they know it’s a fake.’

‘Shit, yes... and we did give it to the Israelis, so that could piss them off.’

‘That’s a puzzle. If the spearhead is displayed in Jerusalem, Vatican should not be unhappy at all, given what else is there for the pilgrims.’

‘Something else then,’ Johnno suggested. ‘In *our* frigging caves!’

‘Or in Shue’s possession.’

‘So why shoot at me then, for fuck’s sake?’

‘Shue is a recluse, never leaves his castle, select few bodyguards.’

‘So I’m the easier target. Great.’ He sighed, taking in the lake view. ‘But if they infiltrated the managers, like the pen-pusher I killed, they must know I’m going after Shue!’

‘That’s a puzzle. So I reckon whatever the Nazis stole, and Gunter got hold off, is in K2 territory.’

‘Fucking great.’ He massaged his sore ear, still buzzing. ‘Why can’t these arseholes just come and ask us for it, we gave back the rest of the stuff!’

‘Maybe they didn’t like *who* you gave it back to.’

Johnno took a big breath. ‘What a fucking mess, got a war on three fronts now.’

‘And from now on I have to address you as *sir*.’

Johnno smiled. 'Not around here, mate. People ain't supposed to know about the Lodge. Beside, guards here would think you were being a creepy little arse licker.'

'Careful. Sir.'

Johnno smirked. 'Open up that bloody cave. Quickly! Maybe what the Pope wants is up there.' He turned and walked briskly back in.

Back in his office he scribbled a lengthy note, handing it to Otto. Otto read it in silence before handing it to Claus, and so on around the senior managers, finally back to Johnno, who burnt the paper.

'Gentlemen,' Johnno began. 'We've had a lot of builders in here, and a lot of visitors. Let's break for an hour, during which time I want a fingertip search of the command centre and a sweep for bugs. He clapped his hands together. 'Helen, early brunch. Grab the sprog.'

'He's in school,' she replied as she stood.

'Really? Makes a change. You and me then.' He led her out of his office, turned right and advanced just five steps and then into the mini-canteen that the ladies used to make drinks and food for meetings in his office. 'Excuse me, ladies.' He sat on the one small table available, room opposite for Helen. Just. 'English breakfast, tea.' He faced Helen. 'What would you like?'

'Just some toast.'

The ladies got to work, nervous of the company.

'The extractor fans in here are nice and loud,' Johnno mentioned.

'Being bugged?' she whispered. He nodded. 'Shue?'

He shook his head as his tea was placed down, his Simpsons mug.

'Who?' she mouthed.

He leant forwards. 'God's warriors.'

She eased back, taking a long time to think about it. 'Gunter ... Nazi relics ... church relics? Here?' He nodded.

‘The caves?’ He shrugged. ‘Why kill you? Why not ask for them?’

‘We gave the spearhead to the Israelis,’ he carefully mouthed.

‘Ah. Still, a bit extreme?’

‘Something under the sofa in the back room, something they want very badly.’

‘They’re supposed to be quite organised and efficient. But mostly they outsource to the Italians. I’ve never heard of them being this aggressive.’

Again he shrugged. ‘What would make them this pissy?’

‘Something that might destroy them?’

‘They never shot Dan Brown, and he’s fucked them up!’ he whispered.

She shook her head. ‘The believers either ignored his book or saw it as proof that Jesus actually existed. If anything, it’s got people involved with the debate. As some say, *to wonder is to open the door to God.*’

‘You’re a smart bird, Helen.’

She lowered her head. ‘Not smart enough.’

‘One door closes, another opens. If not, you kick the damn door in.’

She made eye contact. ‘I got some odd looks in that meeting. And you heard what Stanton said.’

‘I’m the boss!’ he forcefully whispered with strong eye contact. ‘You stay as long as you like.’ He studied her for a moment. ‘You want a job?’

She took a long time answering. ‘I’m not ready to give up. I desperately want to be back at my old desk.’

He sipped his tea. ‘I can’t arrange that, but I can give you a similar job here. If anything, you’ll have more resources *and* more freedom to do what you like.’

‘What would the job be?’

‘Head of K2.’

She frowned strongly. ‘You’re the boss here now. *And* Beesely may come back.’

‘I’m the owner. I’m also crap at the paperwork. I’m better... *out there*, shooting people. Which is why I’m going after Shue myself. If Beesely does come back it’ll be a few hours a day when he’s well. You and he would make a great team.’

‘What would *you* do?’

‘What jobs need doing; agent training, security. Same as I did when Beesely was running things.’

‘Otto didn’t look too happy earlier.’

Johno took a moment to think. ‘He’s got a baby due in four months, and I don’t want to be telling his missus he’s dead. Besides, he buckles under pressure.’ Johno glanced over his shoulder at the catering staff.

‘So you’ve sent him off?’

‘It’s for the best. Still, if he’s not happy I’ll leave him to it and piss off myself.’ She stared hard. ‘Otto built K2 - it’s his puppy. If he told a manager to shoot me they probably would. He recruited most of this lot, trained them up.’

‘You seem to get along OK.’

‘Chalk and cheese. If Beesely wasn’t here then him and me would never have got it together. Too different. What I did today he’s wanted to do all along, just needed a nudge. He wants to raise his kid, just terrified to admit it to anyone.’

‘You’re not as daft as you look.’

‘And you look rather nice in tracksuit and t-shirt.’

‘Are you flirting with me?’

‘Certainly not. You’re *way* too posh for me. I’m not in your league.’

‘In ... my ... league,’ she repeated, her head lowering. She coughed out a small laugh before raising a hand to mouth, her eyes moistening.

‘Hey,’ he called in a strong whisper. ‘If the world out there don’t appreciate you, me and Thomas will.’

Claus popped his head in. ‘Three bugs attached to the mobile phone network,’ he admitted, looking peeved.

‘I want *all* English troops and the crazies here now.’

Claus withdrew.

‘Is that good or bad?’ she asked, wiping her eyes.

‘Good we found them. Problem is, one of the fuckers doing the search may just be adding more as he goes.’

Otto entered, pulling up a chair in the cramped room as Johnno’s meal was placed down. ‘I have isolated a connection between the guards who tried to kill you,’ he quietly stated. ‘They all served in the Swiss Guard at the Vatican.’

‘Of course!’ Helen let out.

‘That those ceremonial poofers?’ Johnno asked. Otto nodded. ‘How many more of –’

‘Twelve,’ Otto cut in.

‘Any here?’

‘Two.’

‘The rest?’

‘Some in casino security, one *gives* the chair, so I have ruled him out.’

Johnno’s eyebrows shot up. ‘Should bloody well hope so. But check anyway.’

‘The rest provide low-level security at other locations, such as banks.’

‘Pick them *all* up, chair room. Then check their houses for -’ He faced Helen. ‘- what? Religious stuff?’

She nodded. ‘And calls to Rome.’

‘It is in hand,’ Otto stated.

Johnno took a mouthful. ‘The two here, I want them held outside for me in twenty minutes. Have they been into any critical areas?’

Otto shook his head as Helen grabbed some crispy bacon. ‘They are Grade One, not allowed in here. Their Catholic beliefs prevent their progress.’

‘Are we prejudiced?’ Johnno teased.

Otto lifted an insulted Swiss eyebrow. 'No. We are practical, suspicious of religious people wanting to join a group that kills people.'

Johno smiled broadly.

'So,' Helen began, 'when they were in the Swiss Guard they were noticed for their convictions, taken into the inner sanctum and ... *impressed* with some old relics or something, convinced them that they should be agents of God.'

Johno curled a lip, not that interested, and tucked in.

'The Swiss Guard has been around since 1510,' Helen commented. 'Long time to build up recruitment methods... that work well. And they're all from the German areas of northern Switzerland, your recruitment ground. I'm sure the Vatican can be persuasive.'

'Yeah. Join us, get your place in heaven,' Johno suggested. 'Hard to argue against, *or* prove wrong!'

Otto bowed his head toward Helen and left.

'What will you do to them?' she asked.

'No way we'll turn them, they've got God on their side. But I'll have a word. What would *you* do, if you were the head of K2?'

'If they couldn't be turned ... make an example of them of course.'

'Fine. Your first official act.'

'I'm not shooting anyone!' she forcefully whispered.

'You must have ordered hits in MI6! I know, I carried out some of them.'

'Of course. But I didn't pull the bloody trigger!'

'If you're going to work effectively here, you'll need a stronger stomach.'

'Listen, Rambo, I fight with my brain, not my brawn! I think my way through problems, avoiding the conflicts if possible. Measured stealth!'

'Fine. You think, I'll shoot.'

The two junior guards stood held at the drawbridge, a crowd gathering.

Johnno walked out flanked by four troopers, Big Dave and Big Mac approaching. 'How you guys doing?'

'Doc' released us,' Big Dave explained. 'Ears checked out. Yours?'

'Sore!'

'What's up 'ere?' Big Mac asked.

'Potential spies.'

'We heard. Four attempts on you?' Big Dave asked.

'Yep.'

They approached the suspected men, a gap forming. Johnno waved the crowd back, enlarging the arena. He stood directly in front of the two suspects and folded his arms as he studied their faces.

'Sir?' one of the prisoners asked. 'What is wrong, sir?'

'We had some information. Maybe one, or both of you, are working for our enemies, trying to kill K2 staff. Not to mention trying to kill little old me.'

'No, sir,' the first man spat out, taking in the faces.

'Not to worry, we believe in due process – as Kojak used to say,' Johnno suggested, a hard stare at the men, a few odd looks from the crowd. He took out a pistol, a Beretta, handing it to the second man. 'Release the magazine.'

The man did so, the men behind forming a gap.

'Check it.'

He did as asked.

'Pull the slide back and check the barrel.'

Again, the man did as asked.

'Re-load it. Check the hammer.'

The weapon got reloaded, and cocked ready.

'I didn't say to cock it.'

The man raised his head, a sadistic smile forming. Quickly he raised and fired directly at Johnno's face, half of

his own face off a second later, blood spattering across guards. The man spun and dropped, screaming.

‘One down,’ Johno commented.

‘Jesus!’ Big Dave let out. ‘You rigged the barrel.’

‘Yep. Ready made for this very purpose. Got a shelf of them in the armoury, so be careful.’

Johno approached the second man. With a hard stare, hands on hips, he said, ‘Finished him off, would you, there’s a good suspect.’

The guard didn’t hesitate, stamping down onto the fallen man’s neck, standing on the man’s throat with his full weight applied. Turning, he offered Johno a hard glare. ‘I am not a traitor!’ he growled.

‘Glad to hear it.’ Johno faced the senior guard. ‘Hold him till we clear his name. *Do not* ... assume he is a traitor.’

‘Wait!’ the second suspect guard growled. ‘He is not dead.’

Two shots rang out from the side of Johno; Mavo firing.

‘Is now, spring chicken,’ Mavo suggested.

Johno headed back inside, followed by many troopers and ‘old crazies’. At the command centre walkway he shouted, ‘Stow your weapons against the wall, I want a finger tip search for bugs. Coffees when you’re ready, you’ll be here *all* frigging day.’

In his office he found Otto, Claus and Mathius, jackets off and sleeves rolled up, searching in earnest. Even Helen lent a hand searching.

‘Earning your keep, guys?’

‘Nothing here,’ Otto suggested, a little out of breath.

‘Just found another spy,’ Johno said as he opened the fridge. Everyone focused on him. ‘Gave him a rigged weapon and he tried to shoot me. Second man seems OK.’ He opened a can of beer and eased back. ‘I got the Brit’ guys out there searching away. I know I can trust *them*.’

‘I would not have thought it possible,’ Mathius said with a sigh, approaching the desk. ‘Especially from ... you know who.’

‘I’ll explain it at some point. Let’s just say Gunter pissed off some people, who then spied on him.’

‘I think this room’s clear,’ Helen suggested. ‘It’s pretty Spartan, not much in the way of hiding holes.’

‘Yeah, might be right. Anyway, boys and girls, no discussion of *you know who* in here.’ He gulped his beer and stood. ‘Otto, Helen, can we walk and talk?’ He led them out and toward the dungeon, beer can in hand as they stepped down the stairs, the lift still out of use. Mavo and Blinkey stopped in the stairwell and sat.

Plonking down on the sofa Johno asked, ‘Stiff drink, anyone?’

‘No, thanks,’ Helen offered, Otto shaking his head.

‘Otto, I’d like Helen to be more actively involved in K2. I think we can make use of her knowledge and skills.’

Otto faced her. ‘Will the British Government come after you?’

‘If they could prove it, yes. If they suspected, maybe. But Beesely was here ... sorry, *is* here. And he broke the same contract I signed. I guess that, if K2 is useful to them, and they think that I am swaying things the British way ... then maybe they would be OK with it.’

Johno asked, ‘What if they thought you were out for British establishment blood?’

She shrugged. ‘They’d come for me.’

‘They would not dare,’ Otto snarled. ‘They would not get to you, and we would retaliate.’

‘I have family in the UK,’ she pointed out. ‘If they wanted to exert some pressure ... they could.’

‘And risk a massive retaliation from us,’ Otto suggested. ‘I do not believe they would be so direct. They may ask for your removal, and they may try and use leverage against us, perhaps.’

‘So, Otto, do you think we should make use of Helen?’
Johno asked, causing an odd look from Helen.

‘I am surprised you are asking me, Johno, not telling me on this... strange day.’

‘Otto, if you asked me to leave K2 I’d be gone in ten minutes.’

That took Otto by surprise. ‘I am not sure *why* ... you think it necessary to say such a thing?’

‘You built K2, not me. I inherited it, thanks to Beesely’s stupidity in trusting me in this position. It’s your group, I’m just playing a part.’ He sipped his beer. Otto glanced at Dame Helen, but made no comment. Johno asked him, ‘Was there anything that I did today that you *particularly* want over-turned?’

Otto considered it. ‘No, all of your decisions had logic and reason. I don’t always see that logic at first, it takes some time to see what you see. You have a strange habit of... seeing straight through a complex problem, picking out just that which is relevant. You come to conclusions that I may get to after a day or two, in a second or two.’

‘Simple mind, that’s why,’ Johno joked.

‘You’re brighter than most give you credit,’ Helen suggested.

‘Now *you’re* starting to sound like Beesely,’ Johno told her. ‘So, Otto, what about Helen?’

‘What position would you like Helen to take?’ Otto delicately asked.

‘Something simple ... say, head of K2.’

Otto’s cocked a Swiss eyebrow. ‘You are serious?’

‘Do you know *anyone* better suited? Helen has more knowledge of what we do than you, me and Beesely combined. By all accounts she’s probably just as good as *you* as an administrator. Just think what the two of you could do with some paper-clips and a filofax.’

She turned to Otto. ‘He’s not quite *with* the computer age.’

Otto nodded. Facing Johnno he said, 'Helen *would* be better suited at the office work than you.'

'And better looking,' she added.

'Much ... better looking,' Otto added. 'And smells nicer.'

'Steady, I'm still the owner.' They laughed. 'So, Otto, do I have your permission?'

'I would like to discuss it with Beesely, if I may.'

'Of course, pop and see him, keep him up to date. Just don't tell him I'm going on a suicide mission.'

'Is it?' she asked, suddenly serious. 'A suicide mission.'

'No more dangerous than a walk around the courtyard, love,' he offered. 'If anything, safer!'

Otto admitted, 'He has a point.' He stood. 'If you will excuse me, Helen.'

'Oh!' Johnno called, 'Get Blaum here tonight, overnight bag.'

'I am sure he will be ... pleased, at the prospect.'

She stood, watching Otto leave. No sooner had Otto disappeared out the door Thomas bound in, school uniform and bag. He immediately ran to the sofa and plonked down next to Helen.

'You will be staying here?' he asked.

'I may be ... working here. It hasn't been decided yet.'

Thomas faced Johnno. 'You're the boss, you say it's OK!'

'Otto and Grandpa must talk about it as well.'

'I saw Grandpa this morning.'

'How is he?' Helen asked.

'He's OK. Just his arm does not work. He was talking quick like before, laughing. And I had a go in his wheelchair.'

'He has a wheelchair?' Johnno puzzled.

'Yes, electric. Very fast.'

'That's good progress, if he can get into a chair,' Johnno said, facing Helen.

‘Mild stroke, limited effect,’ she said with a shrug. ‘My uncle had one. He spent ten, fifteen years in a wheelchair.’

Johnno lifted his phone. ‘This is Johnno. I want all areas of the compound made wheelchair accessible within two days. I want an electric ramp in the command centre.’ He hung up.

‘Power of the man,’ Helen said, focused on Thomas but nodding towards Johnno.

‘He can do anything!’

‘Can’t cook,’ she countered.

Thomas shook his head, smiling. ‘I warm up the cheeseburgers for him and the troopers.’

‘Good lad,’ she offered. ‘He needs looking after.’

‘Can you cook?’ Thomas asked.

‘Oh, yes. I’m a very well trained cook.’

‘Horo-show,’ Thomas pronounced, Russian for ‘good’.

‘Par Ruski?’ she asked. You speak Russian?

‘Da. Chute-chute.’

She smiled widely.

‘You know what chute-chute means?’ Johnno called.

Thomas said, ‘A little bit?’

‘Not quite. Children say it, like itsy-bitsy. I used to say, Par Ruski Marlinky.’

Helen cut in with, ‘I speak Russian, small.’

‘You can teach me?’ Thomas asked.

‘Par-shal-sta,’ Helen carefully mouthed.

‘You’re welcome?’ Thomas asked.

‘Or ... *pleased to*?’ Helen explained.

‘Earning your keep already,’ Johnno commented. His phone chirped. ‘Yeah?’

‘Sir, a strange sound in the roof of the lower bunker.’

‘I know what it is, not to worry.’ He stood. ‘I’ll be back. Carry on bonding.’

In the lower bunker the staff were concerned at a loud tapping sound now centred in the ceiling at the rear. Johnno stepped in, Mavo and Blinkey in tow, just as a stone dropped onto a desk, the lady occupying that position letting out a short sharp shriek.

‘Clear that area, move the desks,’ Johnno ordered.

Claus appeared at his side. ‘What it is?’

‘Tunnel rats,’ Johnno suggested.

A large piece of plaster fell away, luckily just hitting the floor, followed by a rock. A hand poked through, waving.

Johnno jumped up onto a desk. ‘That you Grey?’

‘Who else?’ came back, badly distorted.

‘How wide is it up there?’

‘Here it’s four foot square. There used to be shaft of some sort, concreted over.’

‘What else is up there?’

‘A tunnel heading towards the rear, long tunnel. Probably connects with the others.’

‘Good work.’

Johnno jumped down, waving over Claus. ‘Clear this area, move the desks, get some builders in here and open up that hole. Tell you what I’m thinking, an emergency exit up that way in case the other entrances are blocks.’

‘Ah, yes. Good.’

‘And the tunnel above should connect with the new long tunnels we found, so staff could escape right across the mountain if need be.’

Claus nodded enthusiastically.

‘Johnno!’ Grey called, badly distorted. They looked up as several gold coins dropped through the hole.

‘Shit. More treasure.’ He and Claus picked them up.

‘Roman!’ Claus stated. ‘Like the others.’ Staff closed in.

‘What else is up there?’ Johnno shouted.

‘Just them!’ Grey shouted.

Otto stopped outside Beesely's room, an eyebrow raised at the two troopers wearing 'Johnno' moustaches, pausing before he entered. 'Hey, old fucker,' he flatly announced.

Beesely smiled. 'If you are going to do a Johnno impression, you'll need a moustache like the boys outside. At first I thought they were taking the piss, then found out it was Johnno's orders to help confuse people trying to shoot him.'

'We seem to have dealt with that.'

'Seem?'

Otto took out a piece of paper, crossed his lips with a finger and handed Beesely the note.

Beesely read it. 'Dear God.'

Otto took the paper back. 'We are making good progress on our plans to attack Herr Shue. Problem is, he and Gunter were close friends, both ... *interested* in stolen Nazi treasures, in particular Shue likes *religious* artefacts.'

'Ah.'

'So, how are you?'

'Better by the hour. Can't use the toilet properly yet, limited control, but improving.'

'When you return to the castle there will be several nurses for you. And Johnno has ordered the castle to be ... wheelchair friendly.'

'Good, good. What else has he been up to?'

'He spoke to the Americans. They are ... ready to assist. But on another matter, he came to me and *asked* permission to give Dame Helen a job.'

'Helen? A Job doing what?'

Otto paused. 'Head of K2.'

Beesely's eyes widened. 'Head of K2?' Otto nodded. Beesely lay back and considered the implications. 'Would piss off the Prime Minister.'

'No longer relevant, since Johnno has ordered his removal.'

‘He what?’ Beesely forced out in a whisper.

‘The Americans were of a similar opinion. In fact, they sounded as if they were about to follow that course of action.’

‘Yes, I suppose so,’ Beesely calmly stated. ‘PM didn’t follow through on the Luchenkov threat, now all this – Britain devastated. I’ve been watching the British news, lots of difficult questions. And they arrested some of our rescue people. Tabloids giving them hell over it.’ He sighed. ‘What else?’

‘The ... *golf club*, took a vote. Unanimous decision. They wish Johnno to *take up* golf.’

‘What? They mad?’

‘That’s what Johnno asked them.’

‘He did?’

‘We now have video conferencing set-up. And I swear he will give me a heart attack, the way he talks to some people. Still, it seems to be working.’

‘I’ll call Olly later. I guess they want to rein in K2, keep us on board.’

‘I will take a wild guess here, as you English say, but I think Johnno will be difficult to ... *rein in*.’ Beesely smiled. Otto added, ‘Tomorrow morning is the meeting of persons interested in things over the border, after that we move against Shue.’

‘Is the plan of attack well thought out?’

‘As detailed and precisely planned as the Swiss, as Johnno told the American Secretary before he had even considered a plan.’

‘So, is it?’

‘Let’s just say, in your present condition – no shocks.’

‘Oh ... gawd.’

‘What about the matter of Dame Helen?’ Otto pressed.

‘What’s your instinct tell you?’ Beesely posed.

Otto glanced at the windows. Turning back he said, ‘Johnno appointed me Group Managing Director, something I

have never been till now – not officially, then told the assembled managers that I would be spending less time at K2.’

‘He did?’

Otto turned and gave a quick head tip. ‘But later today he told me that he may reverse any decisions, implying that the final decision would be mine.’

‘It was nudge,’ Beesely said with a smile.

‘A nudge?’

‘You got a fiancé, kid on the way. Think about it. Think what it’ll be like when the kid is born and your dear lady wife is complaining that you are not there with her! He’s letting you off the hook, saving face. It would not have looked good if you needed to spend more time with your family if there was a crisis at K2.’

‘Besides, bringing a life into the world and nurturing it may alter your perspective when it comes to taking lives. It was a good move - I can see that now. Take his advice. The one thing that Helen *will do* is keep Johnno in check. Besides, she’s an excellent administrator. Swiss managers will get on well with her.’

‘You seem to have made a choice?’

‘I’m making a choice for *you* ... that you can’t yet see the wisdom in. Don’t worry, you will. Spend more time in Zurich and with your wife. That’s an order.’

‘Yes ... father,’ Otto mocked.

5

In the dungeon Helen sat helping Thomas with his history homework, coffee in hand. Johnno now slumped down opposite, amused by the scene.

‘Problems?’ she softly asked.

‘Quite the opposite, a new secret tunnel!’

‘Secret tunnel?’ Thomas gasped, wide-eyed. ‘Where?’

‘You know the small bunker at the back? This new tunnel goes up from there to the middle of the cliff face.’

‘It goes up?’ Helen puzzled.

‘Some sort of old vertical shaft.’

‘Ah,’ she let out, a slightly puzzled expression. ‘Why is that good?’

‘It also connects to the larger new tunnels we found, least we think it does. Gives people in the bunker an extra way out if there’s trouble.’

She turned back to Thomas. ‘Why did the Germans distrust the Jews in the 1920s and 1930s?’ He looked at his notes. Without waiting she added, ‘The Russian Revolution?’ Thomas glanced at his notes. Helen explained, ‘The majority of the first Revolutionary Council were...?’

‘Jewish?’ he asked. ‘But I thought the Russians did not like Jews?’

‘They don’t, and Stalin killed many. Ironic, you know this word.’

‘Like moronic?’

She faced Johnno, a squint and a look. Addressing Thomas she said, ‘Ironic, because many Jews started the Russian Revolution, then the future Russian leaders killed many of them.’

Thomas frowned heavily as he thought. ‘Gunter sent his wife to spy on grandpa, but she loved him. Ironic?’

Helen and Johnno both smiled.

‘Very!’ Helen pointedly suggested. ‘And also a *paradox*. He started this whole thing off ... and sealed his own fate.’

As Johnno observed, sipping from his can, Helen went right through sixty years of history with Thomas, expertly relayed – since even he was following.

An hour later his phone rang. He gave a quietly satisfied, ‘Yeah?’

‘Sir, they have connected the caves, they are asking for you.’

‘On my way,’ he sighed. He eased up and stretched.

‘Have fun,’ she offered, filling in some of Thomas’ homework questionnaire – in German, but with Swiss spellings.

Through the tank room opening it took five minutes to walk the length of the new tunnel, laid out almost in a straight line, passing many guards and engineers as he went. The tunnel had been roughly chiselled through black rocks, some ten feet high in many places, its height varying, as did its width. At least it wasn’t wet, he considered. His party trundled along the uneven floor using torches and lamps, finding Mr. Grey at the opening of a new tunnel on the left.

‘Quite a breeze,’ Johno commented, holding out his hand and judging the brisk flow.

‘This goes up to the cliff face,’ Grey informed him. ‘But there’s a room and some artefacts.’

Johno stopped dead. ‘Religious artefacts?’ Grey nodded. ‘Best have a butchers then.’ Johno ducked in and began the slow climb.

‘That’s London Cockney rhyming slang. Butcher’s hook – look?’ Grey queried from behind, his words echoing.

After fifty yards the tunnel levelled off and widened into a cavern some ten metres around the base, narrowing to almost a point at the ceiling. Dotted around the edges were numerous carved images; saints, Mary and Child, crude crucifixion scenes. And all were either smashed in half or chipped.

‘Pope will be pissed,’ Johno suggested.

‘They don’t look valuable,’ Grey commented. ‘Poorly carved, no gold enamelling.’

Johno faced a guard, pointing towards the dot of light that signified the cliff face exit. ‘Get up there and use your radio. I want a religious artefact expert here in a hour. Or less!’

The man hurried off as Johno studied the objects with a perplexed frown. ‘You’re right, don’t look anything special.’ Any other rooms?’

‘Not that I can see, but we’ll need to check the walls,’ Grey suggested.

‘If this lot was valuable it would have been in the other room, not left up here in the damp and smashed.’

‘They don’t look smashed,’ Grey pointed out. ‘More like just dropped and broken, clean breaks in just one place.’

Johno let out a loud breath. ‘Yeah, whatever. Wait for the expert, get the guys working on the walls. If the Ark of the fucking Covenant is here ... let’s find it.’

‘Oh, that’s definitely not here,’ Grey confidently suggested with a slight grin. ‘That’s in a wooden box in a big warehouse in the States, where Indiana Jones left it.’

Johno smiled and headed back down.

* * *

‘Anything?’ Helen asked, Thomas now accessing Wikipedia on his computer, his new unpaid tutor sat next to him.

‘Some old smashed up junk,’ he let out with a shrug. ‘Mary and baby Jesus stone statues.’

‘Still, at least it’s in the right area.’

He shrugged again, putting the kettle on. Stepping up behind Thomas he put a hand on the boy’s shoulder. ‘Vatican?’ he read off the screen. ‘Good, active research. I read up on Kosovo before I went in.’

‘Did any of it sink in?’ she asked with an amused grin.

‘Some. Like it was all Serb before the Ottoman Muslims poured in, now all Albanian. Hence the fighting.’

‘They’re the majority now, so they have a claim to sovereignty,’ Helen suggested, seemingly neutral in the issue.

‘No more that the Muslims in Bradford have over West Yorkshire, babes.’

‘That’s one way of looking at it.’

‘Majority rule is all well and good in some places, love, not in others. Majority here are German speaking. If they

vote to make *all* Switzerland German speaking, would that be OK?’

‘A complex question,’ she admitted.

He made his tea. ‘Those fuckers in Quebec were in the *majority*. Now they won’t allow signs up for tourists in English! And the fucking French Government supports them, supposedly at the heart of Europe – one big happy family of nations. Bollocks.’ She faced him, quietly studying him. He added, ‘I’m with Beesely on that Reversed Economic Migration. If you got the money of the skills, go work and live where you like. No flag waving, no borders, just people being people.’

She studied him a moment longer, then resumed helping Thomas.

Johno lifted his phone. ‘We’ll need two fast Agusta helicopters for the morning, flown ready to Berlin and Vienna, three agents in each. Be there before 7am.’

‘Yes, sir. And Minister Blaum is here.’

‘Already?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Send him down.’ He hung up. ‘Going to spoil *his* day.’ He stopped and blew out. ‘Thomas, back on the clock. You and me going to war in the morning, check your kit, make a bag, and check that *special* Gameboy.’ Thomas jumped up and ran to the snug, Johno gesturing Helen to the sofa. He slumped, spilling his tea. Paying it no attention he sipped. ‘Two heads are better than one, so start being useful, babes.’

‘Is that a patronising ‘babes’, or because you like me?’

‘Because I like you,’ came back without any thought.

She seemed mildly surprised. ‘Oh.’

Footsteps were followed by indistinct greetings, Blaum walking through the door a moment later. Helen jumped up and hugged Max, both beaming smiles at each other.

‘How are you?’ Blaum asked, as if greeting an old friend.

‘Terrible!’ Johno answered for her.

Blaum glanced at him, then at Helen, a concerned look. She lowered her head and sat.

‘Whisky, Max?’ Johno pointedly enquired.

‘At this hour, no, Herr Director,’ Max replied, a glint in his eye.

‘Don’t start with that,’ Johno grumbled. ‘Johno will do. What happened to the Swiss Red Cross in Portsmouth?’

‘We landed them at Southampton airport,’ Blaum explained as he sat and adjusted his suit. ‘They were not so happy to see us, the airport authorities, and delayed the move to Portsmouth by an hour. But so many landed that they just walked around the police. The police complained, and even detained a few of our people, but your newspapers have ... as you say, *crucified* them. Some police officers and airport officials forced to resign.’ Johno glanced at Helen. Blaum continued, ‘They were not so well met, with our foreign accents.’

‘Fucking Brit’s are used to foreign accents! Especially in the fucking NHS!’

‘Some people did not like being treated by foreigners, many asking about the whereabouts of the British Government. Your people organised helicopters and buses, taking the wounded all over England, flew the important injuries – which they are still doing. On the second day the Army arrived in force. By then most of the wounded had been seen or moved, all the Swiss Medics now home.’

Johno lifted his phone. ‘I want every member of the Swiss Red Cross to be sent a gift, something nice, and good praise for them in the papers of Europe, criticism of the British for not making them welcome. Get our newspaper guy Duncan to call me.’ He hung up.

Blaum added, ‘Your people are still there, in Portsmouth. Those who are doctors or qualified paramedics are still in the hospitals or moving patients. Almost three days now. You know about the Air Force pilots?’

‘Yeah, it’s being dealt with - British newspapers hailing them as heroes. If they get kicked out I’ll stick a million quid in their pockets. Beside, we’re just about to kick out the British Prime Minister.’

Blaum and Helen straightened.

‘You will do what?’ Blaum asked.

‘Us ... and other *interested* parties have decided he should go. He knew about Luchenkov, but put economic interests first. So he goes.’

‘How?’ Helen asked, a horrified look.

‘Most effective weapon we have - the British tabloid press! Most dangerous force on the planet. And we don’t even need to lie, just spill the beans.’

‘A dangerous game, Johnno,’ Blaum cautioned.

Johnno eased forwards, resting his elbows on his knees. ‘He knew about the threat, did nothing, and now thousands are dead, the Navy devastated, the British economy fucked!’ He eased back.

‘Is this the crisis you wished to discuss?’ Blaum asked.

‘Nope.’

Blaum glanced at Helen.

‘First things first,’ Johnno began. ‘In a nutshell, Helen is here because she got blamed for the attacks in the UK. She was forced to resign.’

‘No!’ Blaum let out, offering a sympathetic hand for her.

‘And when she got home she found an empty house, Mike off with Tabitha, neither of whom wish to see her ever again.’

Blaum seemed stunned. ‘Mike has left you?’

Johnno answered, ‘They don’t want to be in any danger.’

‘My God,’ Blaum quietly let out, Helen sat staring at the floor.

‘So, whisky yet?’ Johnno pointedly enquired.

‘Please.’

Helen stood and fixed two drinks.

‘Why the overnight bag?’ Blaum asked.

‘You’re going to need the whisky,’ Johnno said with a grin.

‘What is it?’ Blaum puzzled.

‘Actually, hard to know where to begin.’ He considered what to say, finishing his coffee. ‘During the war the Nazis took treasure from churches, stuff that the Vatican would like back.’

‘Of course.’

‘Gunter got hold of some of it –’

‘Oh hell.’

‘And it’s hidden around here someplace. Which is why the Vatican recruited spies from your Swiss Guard to spy on Gunter.’ Johnno waited. ‘You don’t seem shocked?’

‘There have been rumours,’ Blaum admitted. ‘Ironical, but the Vatican has been using Swiss mercenaries and spies for five hundred years.’

‘Funny old world, eh?’ Johnno joked. ‘Anyway, four tried to kill me –’

‘They what?’ Blaum exploded. ‘Impossible!’

‘Afraid so,’ Helen put in.

‘And we captured a few more,’ Johnno added. ‘All served in the Swiss Guard for at least two years, all have been in phone contact with the Vatican recently.’

Blaum sipped his drink and eased back, staring out of focus. ‘This cannot reach the newspapers.’

‘It won’t,’ Johnno assured him.

‘The effect would be terrible for our two countries. Five hundred years of friendship.’

‘Max, what could Gunter have that would make the Vatican get this frisky?’ Johnno asked.

Blaum considered his answer carefully, sipping his drink. Finally he shook his head, ‘I have no idea. I would not have believed that they could be so concerned.’

‘Next problem, and the reason for your visit.’

‘*This* ... is not the reason for my visit?’

‘That’s a minor side issue, we have a bigger problem.’

‘Bigger problem?’ Blaum gasped.

Helen said, ‘I don’t know who enjoys shocking you the most, him or his dad.’

Blaum gulped down the last of his whisky.

‘You know a guy called Johan Shue?’

‘Oh no,’ Blaum let out, looking horrified. ‘The art collector known to Gunter? He has a fascination with stolen religious art.’ He nodded to himself. ‘It’s all starting to make some sense now.’

‘He has two nuclear bombs,’ Johnno softly stated, almost whispering.

Blaum stared, a glance at Helen. She nodded. He could not speak.

Johnno added, ‘Back in 1972 Gunter and Shue were buddies, so they fetched up a crashed American nuclear bomber off the coast of Sicily. For the past ten years Shue has been trying to fix them, since he fell out with Gunter actually. But when Beesely landed here Shue went into overdrive to get them ready.’

Blaum stared at the floor. ‘If Shue has nuclear bombs, he’d probably use them on the Vatican.’

Johnno jumped up, making eye contact with Helen. ‘Shue was best mates with Gunter, so the fucking Vatican probably thinks were helping the fucker!’

‘Hence the interest in killing you,’ Helen pointed out.

Johnno lifted his phone. ‘Get me Stanton!’ He waited.

‘Johnno?’ came a voice a few seconds later.

‘Yeah, listen That 747. Urgent, check the Vatican and then routes north towards Austria, if you now what I mean.’

‘Jesus. You don’t think –’

‘I bloody well do, hence their interest in me. Vatican thinks K2 is just about to stick a nuke up their arses. Johnno out.’ He lowered the phone.

‘Making more sense now,’ Helen suggested. ‘Extreme measures, for an extreme threat.’

‘They must have researched Beesely,’ Johnno complained. ‘How could they think he’d do something so frigging stupid?’

‘It wasn’t Beesely they came after,’ Helen delicately pointed out.

‘Me?’ Johnno queried, wide-eyed.

‘What does your record say?’ she pointedly nudged.

He forced a smile. ‘Alcoholic, suicidal, murderous, violent and anti-establishment ... as well as anti-church.’ She lifted her eyebrows, easing her face forwards, her point made. ‘OK, so they think I’m a nutter,’ Johnno admitted. ‘Still, they could have come and checked.’

‘The guards who tried to kill you,’ Helen began. ‘All junior grades who have, no doubt, all heard the stories about you.’

‘OK, OK. I may have a ... bad reputation.’

‘May?’ Helen teased.

‘Anyway, we killed the soldiers of God,’ Johnno told Blaum. ‘Tomorrow is a big pow-wow, Yanks getting ready for air-strikes on Shue’s castle.’

‘Air-Strikes? In Austria!’

‘He has two nuclear bombs,’ Johnno carefully mouthed. ‘The Yanks are not letting him walk away from this one, not least because the Americans may get some of the blame. Delta Force in Germany, hundred attack helicopters and F15 Eagles. Shue’s days are numbered. As in, one two – end of the calendar.’

‘What have the Austrians said?’ Blaum demanded.

‘They don’t know yet,’ Helen informed him.

‘What?’ Blaum barked. ‘Why not?’

‘We’ll be kidnapping their Interior Minister tomorrow morning—’ Johnno began.

‘Kidnapping him?’ Blaum questioned.

‘Can’t take the risk of Shue finding out. Tell me, do *you* think Shue has people in place in the Austrian Government?’

Blaum calmed, giving it some thought. 'I would guess so.'

Thomas ran out, into the range, three quick shots before hurriedly retraced his steps back into the snug. The look on Blaum's face suggested an explanation was in order.

'Always checks his weapon before we go on a mission,' Johno informed them. 'He won't let me go without him.'

Blaum nodded. 'I have discussed this at length with the boy.'

'Did you talk him round?' Johno asked with a smirk.

'No,' Blaum unhappily replied.

'I've tried as well,' Helen said. 'Strange. My daughter wants nothing to do with me, his lad can't be separated from him.'

Blaum offered her a comforting hand again. He finally faced Johno. 'What is the plan?' he softly asked.

'Kidnap the Austrian guy and then Wilhelm and Novak, drag them here –'

'Novak is here, in Bern.'

Johno sighed in complaint. 'No one tells me these things.' He lifted his phone. 'Novak, the Czech Minister, is in Bern. Grab him discreetly and bring him here, make sure he contacts no one.'

'You could just ask him nicely,' Blaum pointedly remarked, a definite hint of sarcasm.

'Cant take the risk. If Shue knows the authorities are moving against him the nukes may go off.'

'You will storm his castle? You and the Americans?' Blaum asked.

'Nope. Me and Thomas will drive through the front door and offer him the Amber Panels.'

'Amber Panels?' Blaum asked, Helen just as puzzled.

'We've got the Russian Amber Panels.'

'You do?' Blaum questioned. 'Otto did not say.'

‘Yep. Worth a few quid to someone like Shue. I’ll offer them up for sale. Gives me time to check out the place, kill him and his staff, disable the nukes.’

Blaum eased forwards. ‘And if you fail?’

Helen answered Blaum with, ‘Air-strikes!’

Blaum shook his head. ‘You could leave it to the Americans.’

‘And let the world know about Gunter, this bank getting the blame...? Right after the trouble in the Czech Republic.’

‘I see the problem,’ Blaum admitted. ‘Let’s hope the Russians don’t find out about the panels.’ He sighed and rubbed his face. ‘What do you need me to do?’

‘Dusk, tomorrow night, I need an ... emergency exercise, closing the Swiss–Austrian border, last minute to test the readiness. But mostly I need you in the morning, smooth over the Austrian Guy.’

‘Steffan Lepper his name is. I know him.’

‘Good, then you can greet him. In fact, why don’t you fly out there when we grab him.’ Blaum reluctantly nodded. ‘We’d offer you a nice meal in the restaurant, but we ain’t got one,’ Johno said.

Thomas burst out and sat down. ‘I’m ready. Hello Max.’

Max stared at the boy for several seconds. ‘You look after Johno tomorrow, yes?’

Thomas laughed and nodded. ‘If I was not here he would forget his head!’

Helen managed a weak smile.

‘I am looking forward to your golf course,’ Blaum offered. ‘It will be ... relaxing when I visit. Ready for the spring?’

‘No idea. Guess so.’

‘You play?’ Blaum asked, Johno giving him a look. ‘I will give you some lessons.’

Johno lifted his phone. ‘I want two sets of golf clubs, straight away, plenty of balls.’ He hung up.

Helen said, 'Right now that poor girl is sat there staring at her phone, wondering if you're just a bit crazy.'

'Crazy golf?' Thomas asked. 'I'm good at that.'

Johno made eye contact with Blaum. 'Give the political situation some thought, see if I've missed anything –'

'You have missed the border Austria has with Italy.' Blaum noted.

'No, left that one open intentionally,' Johno said with a grin.

'Why?' Blaum puzzled.

'It's already covered,' Johno carefully mouthed. 'And security around the Vatican probably tight as the Pope's ring.'

'Pope's ... ring?' Blaum repeated with a quizzical look.

'Don't ask,' Helen suggested.

Thomas lifted his head towards Johno. 'The Pope has a big ring, I've seen it.'

Johno faced Thomas as Helen covered her mouth. 'Let's hope not!'

6

John's phone chirped twenty minutes later. 'Yeah?'

'Mister Duncan Masters, London, sir.'

'Put him through.' Johno stood and walked into the gym, sitting on a bench. 'Duncan?'

'Yes, Johno. How're things over there?' came a tired voice.

'How are things ... *over there*?'

'Not good, fucking world coming to an end.'

'Tell me ... how do the UK public see the Prime Minister at the moment?'

'Fucking furious. You know they turned away French rescuers mid flight, and others?'

Johno sighed. 'Listen, buddy, million on its way.'

'For which story?' Duncan asked, again sounding tired.

‘The PM.’

‘The PM?’

‘Yeah, I want him trashed.’

‘Pleasure. Not sure we even need the money.’

‘Listen, some things you and the Fleet Street hacks need to know. Dirty bomb attacks were joint venture, al-Qa’eda and Luchenkov, our good friend providing the money. PM met with the Europeans and they pressured him not to rock the boat with Ivan the Terrible, Europeans have a gas pipeline.

‘PM *did not* ask MI6 to go after Luchenkov, allowing him to still control his empire from prison. As far I know they didn’t even monitor the guy, see what he was up to. As for the Government not letting in foreign rescuers - roast their fucking chestnuts.’

‘With the momentum there is already he’d be lucky to survive.’

‘Duncan, we don’t want him to survive. I want the headlines to be ... *PM knew, did nothing.*’

‘I understand. But I’ll have to be careful –’

‘Don’t worry about MI5, their boss was kicked out for nothing - fucking scapegoat like Dame Helen. Which reminds me, any stories about her, let me know. She’s persona grata.’

‘Got ya.’

‘Go have fun, Johno out.’ He stepped back to the sofa.

‘What was that?’ Helen asked.

‘Trying to keep you away from any attack on the PM. So you don’t need to know.’

She stared into her wine, a concerned look from Blaum.

* * *

With fifty curious onlookers going about their business, Johno swung at the ball. What he lacked in finesse he made

up for in power. The golf ball hit the right-most pillbox metal door with a loud 'twang.'

The guards emerged, ears ringing. 'What the hell you doing? You shooting at us?'

'Sorry!' Johno shouted, lining up ready on another ball, Blaum and Thomas watching. An almighty swing, a chip, a new car windscreen being ordered. 'Sorry!'

He tried again, Mavo and Blinkey shaking their heads. An almighty swing, a top-chip, the ball flying away towards the lakeside cottages.

'Fore!' Blaum sarcastically shouted, just before a window broke.

Johno started again. This time a reasonable hit, the ball landing on the lakeside mud. He turned, 'Bet you I can hit the lake.'

'That's two hundred, maybe two-fifty metres,' Blaum explained. 'But you have the height advantage here.'

Thomas shouldered Johno out of the way, readied himself, swung and hit the ball high. It arced with the wind to the left and onto the lakeside road tarmac, bouncing high before bouncing off a cottage patio and into the water. People applauded, Thomas giving a large bow.

Helen appeared through the crowd, taking the club off Johno after he had placed down another ball. She waved him back, Thomas stood keenly watching. With practised skill she hit the ball, sailing high and plopping into the water. The crowd cheered. Without a word she handed him back the club, walking off.

'Johno!' Mavo called. 'You let a girlie beat you!'

Helen stopped and turned, approaching Mavo. Blinkey took a sharp sidestep. 'Girlie?' She stood and glared.

'Ma'am,' I meant.

She inched closer. 'I understand, that being struck full force by a golf club in the chestnuts ... can sometimes hurt.'

His eyes widened. 'I would say so, Ma'am.'

She stepped inside, the crowd deathly silent.

Johno took another swing. ‘Sorry!’

The helicopter coming in to land became an obvious target, Johno’s shot low.

‘Was he aiming at us?’ Novak asked over his headset.

‘I’m sure he didn’t see us, sir,’ the pilot offered.

Novak offered the back of the pilot’s head an incredulous stare. ‘Didn’t see us?’ he barked.

Drum beat

1

Johno met Novak on the grass, edging around a large crane.

‘A very polite and apologetic kidnapping,’ Novak remarked. ‘You are Herr Johno, I believe.’

‘Yes, Minister. We did speak briefly at the caves.’

Novak stiffened, clasping his hands behind his back. ‘This time you both look, and smell, better. So, where is Herr Beesely?’

‘Heart attack.’

‘Oh.’ Novak took a moment. ‘And the meaning of this abduction?’

‘Follow me, I’ll explain.’ He led the curious minister into the tank room and to the new tunnel. ‘In here we found the casings for two old American nuclear bombs.’ Novak’s eyes widened. Johno continued, ‘But the bombs aren’t here, they are in Austria with a fella called Johan Shue.’

Novak straightened, surprised. ‘*He*... is not welcome in the Czech Republic. An art thief.’

‘And he used to be a good friend of Gunter’s. We’re sure he had a hand in the cave complex.’

Novak nodded. ‘And what does this man want with these ... old nuclear bombs?’

Johno stepped closer and whispered. ‘Some believe he wants to attack the Vatican with them.’ Novak looked like he might keel over. ‘Don’t worry, we’re going to stop him. And we’d like your help.’

‘My help?’

‘We’d like you to close your border with Austria tomorrow night, say 8pm.’ He shrugged. ‘Call it an exercise. But there is one small problem.’

‘Just the one?’

Johno forced a smile. ‘Can’t risk Herr Shue finding out.’

‘This is why you abducted me?’

Johnno nodded, offering a serious stare. 'Sorry, but hundreds of thousands could die. We, K2, need your help, Minister Novak.'

Blaum approached. 'Hello again,' he said as he shook Novak's hand.

'Were *you* ... abducted?' Novak sarcastically asked.

'No, just brought down here without knowing why.'

'And who is in charge here, with Herr Beesely ill?'

Blaum gestured with a hand towards Johnno, noting Novak's mild surprise.

'Herr Beesely is my father,' Johnno informed Novak, enjoying Novak's surprise. He gestured towards the ramp. 'Shall we?'

On the grass Johnno could hear helicopters; heavy helicopters. They all stopped at the drawbridge as reports came in of Chinooks approaching. The sun rested low over the hills, an hour or two to sunset, people scanning the horizon.

Johnno lifted his phone. 'Cliff top and ready squads stand-by, but nobody panic, they're probably friendly.'

Grey stepped up a minute later as the Chinooks came into view. 'My team.'

Johnno lifted his phone again. 'Stand down, they're Yanks.'

Grey explained, 'Bomb disposal and containment.'

'What about the boys already here?'

'Need some specialist kit and boys for the nukes.'

Johnno nodded his agreement as the first Chinook scared several builders off the grass as it eased down, rolling forwards till it halted dangerously close to a crane. The second squeezed in, both sets of rotors winding down quickly, soldiers emerging from the rear.

Johnno waved guards forwards. 'Give them a hand with equipment, stuff 'em in the guard barracks.'

'Here comes trouble,' Grey muttered.

Johno followed his look, a uniformed Colonel closely flanked by two soldiers. 'Who's he?'

'Your Delta Force liaison, I guess.'

The group eventually reached the drawbridge.

'I'm looking for a ... Herr Director,' the Colonel announced, staring oddly at all the men in fake moustaches.

People pointed towards Johno, the officer approaching. Grey folded his arms.

The Colonel forced a false smile. 'Look who it is.' They shook. Reluctantly. 'What the hell's with the Village People parade?'

'Village People?' Johno repeated, not happy as guards started laughing.

Grey stepped towards the Colonel, gesturing towards Johno with a grin. 'This is Herr Director, known as Johno.'

The Colonel held out a hand to shake, a sceptical look. 'Real moustache?'

Smiling, Grey explained, 'A lot of people try and kill this guy, hence everyone wearing the funny moustaches to confuse the snipers.'

The Colonel glanced at the hillside trees, his two bodyguards scanning the mountain with professional concern, before taking in the building work on the roof.

'Come on inside,' Johno suggested, mumbling about funny moustaches.

In his office Johno sat, the Colonel stood off to one side, his two bodyguards behind him. Ministers Novak and Blaum sat opposite, Mr. Grey sat on cabinet as Otto appeared.

'What, no moustache?' the Colonel asked Otto.

'Mine is at home,' Otto flatly replied. 'And I can do the English accent quite well.' He shook the officer's hand. 'I am Otto Schessel, Group Managing Director.'

The Colonel glanced at Johno. 'Really, I thought he was the Director?'

‘Herr Johno owns the bank,’ Otto informed the Colonel before moving to Novak, who now stood with Blaum. ‘Hello again, Mister Novak. And apologies, Minister, for your abduction.’ They shook.

‘Abduction?’ the Colonel muttered.

Otto shook Blaum’s hand. ‘You are early, Minister,’ he said, as if that label was as bad as being late.

‘When I heard about the overnight bag ... I panicked.’

Otto nodded, a sympathetic look offered before sitting next to Johno.

Johno said, ‘So, Colonel, we weren’t expecting you?’

‘On the hush hush,’ the officer replied. ‘Quite odd really, I was tasked with preparing a plan of attack on this place a month ago.’

Johno’s brow slowly pleaded. ‘You were?’

‘James Kirkpatrick,’ the Colonel carefully mouthed.

‘Ah,’ Johno and Otto said at the same time, exchanging glances.

‘The *late* ... Mister Kirkpatrick,’ the officer added.

‘No, still alive,’ Johno lightly informed him.

‘Alive?’

‘We have him,’ Johno said with menace.

‘Jesus. That can’t be pleasant for him.’

Johno offered the officer a dangerous look. ‘Most definitely not.’

Helen walked in, Johno standing even before Otto, the other gentlemen following.

‘Colonel, this is the former head of British Intelligence, Dame Helen,’ Johno explained.

He shook her hand, giving her an American, ‘Mam.’

‘Helen, this is Minister Novak, Czech Interior Minister,’ Johno added. They shook, Helen walking around and sitting next to Otto, an alcoholic drinks tray being brought in almost immediately and placed down.

‘Late enough in the day, gentlemen,’ Johno suggested. ‘Colonel?’

‘Whisky. Neat. Thanks.’

Johno faced Novak. ‘Minister?’

‘With water and ice. Thank you.’

The drinks were handed out, Helen now with a wine in hand, Johno a whisky. A manager stepped in and placed down a map of the area of Shue’s castle, handing out A4 photographs of the castle and surrounding area, before sitting to one side with pen and pad ready.

‘Seen the photo before, Colonel?’ Johno asked.

‘Yeah, yesterday. Near well impregnable. Our best guess was the caves at the bottom.’

‘Which will be easy to defend,’ Grey curtly pointed out. ‘A single lift up to the castle.’

‘Not an issue,’ the Colonel insisted. ‘Nukes are going to be down in the caves, so isolating the castle will be a good move, keep the shooters up top. We ain’t interested in them, just the hardware. Local authorities can deal with the bad guys.’

‘Good point,’ Johno suggested, a glance at Grey.

Helen inched forwards. ‘External electricity cut-off would isolate the lift.’

‘Yeah,’ Johno enthused, fixing on the manager.

‘There are power cables going into the castle, but also a back-up generator,’ the manager informed the room.

‘Standby to cut the electricity,’ Johno ordered.

‘Besides,’ the Colonel added, ‘we’ve been ordered to do nothing till the castle is reduced to rubble.’

Johno focused on the man. ‘Hopefully, it won’t come to that. Our boys will be fighting their way in.’

‘I understand you got some good climbers here?’ the Colonel asked.

Johno thumbed towards Otto. ‘This good looking fella climbed Everest, and K2 twice!’

The Colonel was clearly impressed. Then he realised. ‘Oh, K2. I get it!’

People stared at the officer for a few seconds. Johno added, 'We have some of the world's best climbers here. They go up the Eiger for kicks on a Sunday afternoon.'

'It *is* Switzerland!' the Colonel laughed, joined by Otto, Blaum and Helen. Novak sat as pious as normal.

Johno suggested, 'Our managers will fill you in tomorrow on how our boys attack, the time line and positioning. If all goes wrong you go in knowing where our lot are - and what they look like! Where you *will* come in useful, is after we contain the nukes. They'll need a heavy escort, I'm guessing.'

The Colonel tipped his head in agreement. Bilbo appeared, knocking on the door.

'Bilbo, come in,' Joho called, standing.

Bilbo noted the stiff soldiers with a nod, then the Colonel.

'Where you been?' Johno asked.

'Induction, kit issue. We're off now to move into position on the bottom gatehouse, lying up tomorrow and observing, then backup cover on the gatehouse tomorrow.'

'Good kit, good plan?' Johno asked.

'Seems like it, your boys know what they're doing.' He waved at the room collectively and left.

Johno sat, noticing the Colonel's look. 'British SAS.'

'Worked with them a lot in Afghanistan. Good boys, when I can understand the slang and they're not taking the piss or stealing our kit. Anyway, with a name like Bilbo he should be in the fucking caves!'

Johno focused on the manager, grinning. 'Give the Colonel a room upstairs, his boys go with Mr. Grey and the rest. Give him anything he needs from a planning point of view, and introduce him to all the Squadron Commanders on this job.'

He gestured the Colonel towards the door as the manager stood. 'Order yourself some room service, anything you want. The officer stepped to the doorway. 'Oh, Colonel,'

Johno called. 'Did you ever meet a gentleman named Henry O'Sullivan?'

The officer stared at floor as he thought back, not registering a connection with Kirkpatrick. Lifting his head he said, 'If you mean the guy who had the big funeral a few weeks back, the diplomat, I think I did once, embassy somewhere. He was the Ambassador to Italy before he retired, then some special advisor to the White House on something. Strange guy, told jokes in Latin.'

The Colonel headed off, Grey following the two soldiers out of the office. Otto and Johno made eye contact.

'Groups within groups,' Otto muttered.

Johno faced Novak and Blaum then eased down. 'Sorry about that Ministers, didn't know *he* was on his way. No one ever tells me anything.' He sat back and paused, studying Novak. 'Are you happy to help us?'

'Of course. This threat is on our doorstep as well. But what of the Hungarians and Slovenians,' Novak asked.

'To tell you the truth, I don't think *our friend* has much of an interest in blowing them up.'

'Still, they should be contacted,' Novak firmly suggested.

'Do you know any of their security Ministers personally?'

'Yes,' came flatly back. Johno waited expectantly. Novak offered, 'I can contact them tonight, get them here under false pretences. I believe they will come.'

'Then it was a good idea for us to ... *invite you* here.'

Novak looked glumly back. 'My I use your phone.'

'Your mobile will work in here,' Otto informed him.

Novak took out his mobile, surprised by the signal strength. He stepped out.

Johno quickly jabbed the phone. Whispering he said, 'Novak is making some calls, listen in, cut the line if he is doing *anything* other than persuading Ministers from Hungary and Slovenia here. Thank you.'

‘You can do that?’ Helen quietly asked.

Johnno faced her. ‘Mobile calls go through our relays, so yeah.’ He winked, lifting the golf club. ‘You can give me lessons when I get back.’

Otto stood. ‘If you will forgive me, I have a hospital appointment with my ... fiancé.’

‘She OK?’ Helen asked as she stood.

‘Five month’s pregnant,’ Otto informed her. He faced Johnno, standing straight. ‘Am I needed *here* ... tonight?’

‘No, but when I leave tomorrow it’s all your show.’

‘I will be here, offering any assistance I can to our new Intelligence Chief.’ As he finished the sentence he offered Helen a warm smile. He tipped his head at Blaum then stepped out.

Johnno faced her with a broad smile. ‘You’re hired then.’ He stood up, grabbed her by the shoulders and plonked her into his seat. A little bewildered, she ran a hand across the desk. ‘Bigger than the last one?’ Johnno asked, sat back in his favourite seat.

‘About the same,’ she commented, studying the phone.

Johnno made eye contact with Blaum. ‘I hate it when women say that.’ Blaum resisted a smile. Johnno added, facing Helen, ‘Push the bottom button and say *all managers please*, there’s a love.’

She did as requested, the managers filing in a minute later. They acknowledged Minister Blaum, some odd looks at Helen sat in ‘the chair’. Finally they were assembled, Claus last in and warmly greeting Helen. He sat off to her left. She faced Johnno and waited.

He grinned and stood. ‘OK boys and girls, we have a new member of staff. As of now, Dame Helen is acting head of K2.’ The managers were rightly surprised. Johnno told them, ‘Please state you name and departmental remit.’

Helen grabbed a pad and paper as they went around the room, starting with Claus.

When finished Johnno said, 'You see, that's progress, 'cause when I took over I didn't do that, and I still have trouble with your bleeding names. Now, some of you are looking a bit shocked. Politely, and Swiss-like shocked, but still shocked. So I'll explain. Dame Helen has more experience of global intelligence matters than everyone in this room combined. She also has neater handwriting than me and can spell big words. Even her golf swing is better than mine. She can't pee standing up, but we'll work on that.'

Helen cocked an eyebrow.

Johnno took out his pistol and cocked it. Holding it he asked, 'Does anyone have any problems with Helen being here?'

Silence engulfed the room.

Claus eased forwards. 'You have an interesting ... *managerial style*, Herr Director.'

'This *is* K2,' Blaum put in, looking glum.

'So good, we're all agreed then. Otto and Beesely are aware and have given the move their blessing.'

'Otto will be spending less time here?' Claus delicately broached.

Johnno holstered the pistol. 'I'm kind of hoping he gets a chance at a normal life, kid on the way and all. Besides, we need to build up the other divisions, and that's his job.'

Managers glanced at each other from under their eyebrows.

Helen said, 'I'm sure you all have a lot to do getting ready for tomorrow. I would like an early meeting –'

'We will be here all night,' Claus informed her.

'Really?' Helen questioned.

Claus added, 'We have camp beds here, wash rooms, good facilities up stairs. We stay here when the need takes. As you said, we have much to do for tomorrow.'

'In which case I'd like to see the detailed plans before Face Fungus goes off on his drive in the country.' Two

managers went after the files. She jabbed the phone. 'Fresh drinks for the managers, please. I guess you know what they like.'

'I'll leave you to it,' Johno said as he headed for the door, golf club in hand. 'Oh, Claus. In the morning, my car, big piece of the Amber Panels, a nice bit that can be easily verified. Dozen gold bars, gold coins, something valuable, painting maybe.'

'Johno?' Helen called, a slight frown. 'What's my job title?'

'Er ... let's say, Director of Intelligence Operations.' He stepped out, Blaum heading for his room and hitching up with Novak.

2

Thomas sat hunched, earnestly studying Wikipedia on his computer, going through the Vatican files.

'You're sat too close,' Johno commented as he entered, throwing off his jacket. 'You all ready?'

'Yes. Have *you* packed?' Thomas asked without detracting from his studies.

'Next job. Oh, Helen will be staying.'

Now Thomas looked around, excited. 'You like her!'

Johno sighed, a hand on the boy's shoulder. 'It's not that easy. She's a quality lady, I'm a soldier.'

Thomas called upon his many years of experience with women. 'You can buy her nice flowers and ... and clothes and really big jewels.'

Johno laughed. 'That works with some women, not her. She's too bright, she'll see right through me. Besides, I smell, I snore and I've got lots of lovely scars.'

Thomas adopted a studious frown, staring at the keyboard. 'It will be difficult, you are a mess.'

'Hey,' Johno laughed. 'You ain't supposed to agree with me!'

‘What time are we off?’

‘Not till noon, kit check in the morning. Got that special Gameboy working?’

‘Yes,’ Thomas answered as he clicked a new web page. ‘And one of those funny pistols.’

‘Careful!’ Johno cautioned.

‘It’s a Beretta, yours is a Browning and mine a Walther, so no problem.’

‘Got a knife?’

Thomas stretched out his leg, lifting his trouser, throwing knife attached.

‘You don’t need to wear it to bed.’

‘It’s in case someone comes for me in the night,’ he idly commented, back focused on the screen. ‘Pistol under the mattress.’

‘Well ... I think we got all the Fifth Column.’

‘Fifth Column?’

‘Google it.’ He headed into the snug to pack.

* * *

An hour later Thomas was five-four up and about to putt. The dungeon’s stone floor lay uneven, making the game more fun. The ball bounced on a crack and missed, Johno laughing. He stepped up, hitting the rim of a cup lying on its side.

Helen appeared wearing casual clothes; sweatshirt, jeans and trainers. ‘Who’s winning?’

‘I am,’ Thomas shouted.

‘Better co-ordination,’ she commented. ‘Less aggression.’

‘Drink?’ Thomas offered.

‘White wine. Nice glass.’

Thomas ran and stopped, turning and offered her a quick glare. ‘I know which glass,’ he protested as she smiled at him.

Johno laughed as he plonked down. 'Beer!' he shouted at the lad. Helen sat opposite, Johno adding, 'Service in here is OK. Most days. How'd the meeting go?'

'Talk about *in at the deep end*. Still, they're a good bunch. We went right through the plans. I made a few minor alterations. Quite enjoyed it, certainly a logistical challenge.'

She accepted her drink from Thomas, who ran back to pull a beer. 'There are cameras with satellite links on roads all around the area in question, live feeds working. That was the one big flaw in the plan –'

'What happens if he moves them out,' Johno finished off, nodding.

'That American Air Force 747 is going around in circles. So far nothing.'

'Still there then,' he said with tired sigh.

'Sleep well ... last night?' she delicately enquired.

'Surprisingly good - no bad dreams. *And* I wasn't pissed.'

'How bad do they get?' she softly asked.

He accepted his beer, studying her for a moment. 'Not something I would wish on my worst enemy. But since I've been here, too busy to notice the dreams, which have dropped away to ... almost nothing.'

'You're focused on a task,' she quietly stated, sipping her wine, Thomas back on the computer. She faced the boy. 'What's he doing?'

'Got Wikipedia up - looking up the Vatican. You're a good influence on him.'

Still focused on the boy she said, 'Most people around here can't decide if *you* ... are either a great influence, or a terrible one.'

'A bit of both, averages itself out. He's a teenage boy, in a castle full of soldiers with guns, his guardian a secret agent. What boy that age wouldn't be happy? I would've been.'

She turned back, focussing on Johnno. 'You had a tough upbringing.'

He shrugged then sipped his beer.

'I had the best of everything.' She turned back to Thomas. 'Father was an Admiral, mother a concert pianist and novelist. Boarding school, Prep, Cambridge University. I joined the police just to prove something. Started at the bottom, worked up quickly, transferred to Intelligence when the KGB and IRA were the problems.'

'And now the IRA drag tourists around the Falls Road. I killed a couple of them, sometimes wish I hadn't.'

She stared, a question in her look.

'If I'd been born the wrong side of the Falls Road I'd be a terrorist for sure. Just down to where you're born - our bad guys versus their bad guys. Most troopers are bright enough not to buy into the political bollocks. Killing is killing, and the guy you tap has a family and some beliefs, just like you.'

'You're a deep thinker, Johnno.'

'Thought you adopted *face fungus* as my official title?'

She laughed. 'Sorry, but I do enjoy taking the piss out of you.'

'If it makes you happy, you carry on, love.'

'A few days ago ... not many people would have dared call me *love*.'

'Bad habit. I'll start with *posh totty* soon enough.'

'Feeling a bit *posher* after the last hour, here in my new, treasonous role, outcast and villain. Dad ... will not be happy. I won't be introducing him to you, that would finish him off!'

Johnno laughed. 'You get on OK with them?'

'Up till now,' she emphasised.

'Beesely will be back in a few days. He'll sort whatever you need done, get your life back on track.'

'You, kind sir, have already given me back my self-respect.' She saluted him with her glass.

He smirked. 'It's a fairy tale castle. Some of the time. If people would stop trying to kill us, then it'd be lovely.'

'The measure of your success, is how many people try and kill you.'

His eyes widened. 'Thomas! New t-shirt. *The measure of your success is how many people try and kill you.*'

Thomas wrote it down. 'It's like the other one.'

'No,' Johno corrected, 'that one says, *success is measured by the number of women you seriously piss-off.*'

'Charming.'

He smiled. 'In order to *seriously* piss-off a girl she has to love you. Or at least like you. It's a hidden meaning.'

'Another Johno joke!' Thomas called. He read his email, 'What happened when Princess Helen kissed Johno?' Their collective eyebrows shot up. 'Answer, he turned back into a frog.'

Thomas was in hysterics, Johno and Helen not able to resist laughing as well.

'Bastards,' Johno laughed.

'Can't keep any secrets around here, obviously,' she noted, sipping her wine.

'But you didn't kiss me. I feel cheated, I want my ten dollars back.'

'Cost you a lot more than that!' she whispered, looking out from under her eyebrows.

'Your starting salary *is* a quarter million,' he teased.

'Are you any good with a foot rub?' she whispered.

He shrugged. 'I'll give it a go.'

'I've got a nice red wine open in my room.'

They stood.

'Thomas, go to the cinema,' Johno ordered.

In the courtyard Thomas asked for a car and escort from the ready-squad.

'Where you off?' a trooper asked.

‘Johnno told me to go to the cinema, must be something good on. He is helping Helen with her bad feet – he’s rubbing them.’

The four troopers stared down, eyes wide.

‘Thomas, when a man tells his boy to ... *go to the cinema*, it’s sometimes because he wants to be alone with his lady friend.’

They waited, Thomas thinking it over with a studious frown.

Thomas huffed. ‘Why did he say to go to the cinema then, he usually says to go upstairs for an hour when he wants a shag.’ He stormed back inside, the troopers watching him go, their mouths hanging open.

3

Helen woke alone, lifting up quickly and checking the room. Johnno sat in a t-shirt and his Simpson’s shorts, staring out the window.

‘Nervous?’ she asked.

He glanced over his shoulder. ‘No, I used protection,’ he flatly stated. She sighed, shooting him a look. He asked, ‘Did I snore this time?’

‘Once. I shoved you on your side. Still, I’m practised at that.’

Johnno turned to the window again. ‘Ah. I see.’

‘*Are* you nervous? About today?’

‘Not really. Got the plan straight in my head. But years of experience in the SAS told me that planning was only useful up to a certain point. After that, you improvise. The one thing you can be certain of with good plan - is to forget it once the shooting starts.

‘Bombs never drop where they’re supposed to, people don’t react they way you’d expect. Attack here, they run that way. You can be sure they’ll run the other fucking way. I’ve

always liked to just get there then make a choice. I need to see things, and not just on paper.

‘In Bosnia we had this great plan to blow up a Serb arsenal in one of their bases. Sneak up to point ‘A’, sneak across to point ‘B’. Great on fucking paper, but when I got there the field between points ‘A’ and ‘B’ was a foot under water - so no crawling across. Had to go right around the far side, extra hour.

‘When I got there I noticed a mine field, right next to point ‘B’, not in the plan. If the field hadn’t been flooded I’d have gone across the second field on my stomach. Boom! My chestnuts one way and the rest of me the other.’

‘Lucky.’

‘Not really, you just need to assess things when you get there. I’m starting to think Shue don’t know I’m coming. And with a hint at the panels, he won’t shoot me.’ He faced her. ‘Some breakfast, slack draws?’

‘Slack draws?’ she repeated, easing out of bed. Shaking her head she stepped naked into the bathroom.

‘Was that a *yes*, to breakfast?’ he loudly called.

‘Tea and toast,’ echoed back.

Johno lifted the desk phone. ‘Tea and toast for Helen, English breakfast for me. Ta, love.’ He checked his watch, 6.30am, as the building work re-started. Up to now, he hadn’t realised it had stopped overnight. He lifted the phone. ‘Did the builders stop working last night?’

‘Otto ordered it, sir.’

‘Did he? Oh, OK, ta.’

* * *

A swift kick from Johno woke Thomas forty minutes later. The lad groaned and started to wake as Johno put his bag into the main room, next to the stairs.

‘Test firing,’ Johno shouted to the troopers on the stairs, stepping into the range.

Magazine release, check the magazine – eyeball check, weigh it in hand. Slide back, look up the barrel. Clean. Magazine in, slide forwards, check safety, two rounds into a well torn-up target. Holster weapon, check pockets; magazine in each, another magazine on the holster, satellite phone, two packs of cigarettes, two plastic lighters.

Thomas appeared from the snug, rubbing his eyes. ‘It’s not time!’ he protested.

‘I know. But I thought we’d go over the plan, you and me.’

‘Not before my coffee,’ Thomas croaked.

Johno raised a concerned, parental eyebrow. ‘I told you before, too young for coffee. Have a Red Bull and go all hyper instead.’

Thomas went back to bed, cursing under his breath in German.

4

A knock on the back door of Minister Lepper’s house and he was surprised to find Max Blaum facing him. Lost for words he simply extended a hand, a reflex action, and they shook.

‘I need your help,’ Blaum sombrely stated. ‘There is a serious security situation, here in Austria, which has affected many neighbouring countries. I have a car, please get your coat and come with me, I will explain on the way.’

Lepper had been reluctant to get into the helicopter. Indicating that it, and the burly agents, were K2 had not helped. It took five minutes of earnest persuasion from Blaum, Minister Lepper having to forego his scheduled early meeting. The Augusta helicopter finally lifted off from a small airstrip south east of Vienna.

‘Max, this is very unusual,’ Lepper warned. ‘This could affect relations, and *your* career.’

Blaum lifted his briefcase from the helicopter floor and placed it across his knees. Opening it he took out a file. The first photo he offered was that of Shue.

‘Oh no,’ Lepper said over the headset, recognising the face immediately.

The second photograph displayed Shue’s castle, glanced at by Lepper. The third photograph offered a thermal satellite map, the cave exits labelled and highlighted in English, ‘CIA’ printed on the top. Lepper swallowed.

The next photograph displayed an old American bomber. Lepper frowned at it, then glanced at Blaum, clearly confused. The confusion did not last long. Next came a newspaper cutting from 1972, detailing the story of the loss of the jet bomber between Sicily and Malta, the nuclear bombs on board.

Lepper turned white as Vienna shot past. Next came a photograph of the casings at Zug, followed by an inventory of items being bought by Shue. Lepper slowly turned his head, making strong eye contact.

Blaum carefully stated, ‘They have been made ready to explode.’ He got no response. He continued, ‘The Americans are aware, and have a small Army standing by to assault the castle. Their Air Force stands by to bomb it, but we are hoping it will not come to that. K2 have surrounded the castle and their forces are preparing to take the castle quietly.’

‘Quietly!’ Lepper gasped.

Blaum glanced out the window as pleasant green woodland shot past in a blur. Turning back he said, ‘They will get inside and ... *remove* everyone there. The outside world will never know.’

Lepper took a breath. ‘They can do that?’

‘Yes,’ Blaum said with an emphatic expression and a nod. ‘They are far more powerful than you realise. The American Secretary of State for Defense is in contact with them every day.’

He studied his counter-part. 'I know this is all ... outside of the law, and highly irregular, but the last thing you want is for the people of Austria to know this, or for the world to think that this could happen here - the damage to your country would be great. Your security services would also be... *stretched*, to deal with this.'

'You can trust K2 to deal with this matter, and not take these bombs, maybe for blackmail –'

Blaum's smile caused Lepper to stop mid sentence. 'The director of K2 is personally worth many billions of dollars.' Lepper's surprise was evident, Blaum adding, 'When the bomb went off in the British city of Portsmouth K2 sent more than a hundred million pounds to help treat the wounded. K2 are not interested in financial gains, they are only interested in fighting crime and terrorism.'

Lepper seemed confused. 'They are vigilantes?'

Blaum nodded. 'With the measured and considered assistance of the British and American governments.'

The Augusta banked and turned into a valley. Blaum added, 'The dirty bomb in London was stopped by K2, not the British authorities. The same for the radioactive metal box in Germany.' Blaum glanced past his guest and at the ground flashing by. 'You will see when we get there. Please, trust me for the next twenty-four hours.'

Lepper sat back, noticing now for the first time the low level and high speed of the helicopter.

5

As Johnno walked into his office Claus hurried after him.

'The Austrian Interior Minister, Herr Lepper, is here, sir. Minister Blaum has brought him up to date on the situation, they are in a room upstairs with Minister Novak having breakfast. The Minister for Slovenia is also with them, quite a gathering.'

'And the other two –'

‘Herr Wilhelm and the Minister for Hungary? They will be here shortly, sir. Otto is outside, checking the building work progress.’

Johnno opened the fridge and grabbed an orange juice. ‘Would have *progressed* more if they hadn’t been stopped last night,’ Johnno idly commented, sitting in his old chair.

‘I believe, sir, that Otto wished you to have a ... restful night’s sleep before today’s mission.’

Johnno wasn’t quite sure if he detected a smile as he studied Claus, Helen walking in with a coffee in a white Styrofoam cup. Johnno pointed toward it. ‘Where’d you get that?’

‘Great Hall,’ she said as she sat behind the desk. ‘I did a quick tour, spoke to some of the lads - judge the mood.’

Johnno laughed. ‘I did the same twenty minutes ago. They must be feeling wanted by now.’

‘Ma’am?’ came from the phone.

Helen hit a button. ‘Yes?’

‘German Minister Wilhelm has arrived.’

‘Send him to Minister Blaum. Thank you.’

‘You sound just like the old you,’ Johnno noted.

Helen smiled and squinted at the same time. ‘Do I?’ Claus and Johnno both nodded. She jabbed at the phone. ‘Senior managers, please, Squadron Commanders and Guard Commanders involved in today’s action in ten minutes.’

‘Yes, Ma’am. Herr Stanton waiting for Herr Johnno.’

‘Thank you, put him through.’

The digital clock ticked over as Claus eased the screen around. Johnno glanced over his shoulder. There were now two screens.

‘Two screens,’ Helen pointed out.

‘Stereo!’ Johnno quipped.

A tea was brought in for him, plus a plate of doughnuts, as Stanton appeared on the screen.

‘Doughnuts? At this hour?’ Stanton asked.

‘He has worse habits,’ Helen pointed out. ‘And ... good morning.’

‘Good evening,’ Stanton offered back. ‘So, all ready?’

Helen glanced briefly at Johnno before turning her attention back to the screen. ‘We think so. The castle is surrounded, no movement and little sign of life inside. Our people estimate little more than ten rooms occupied overnight.’

‘He has more people than that,’ Stanton queried.

‘Then they’re in the caves,’ Johnno suggested. ‘Or some internal rooms we can’t see.’

‘Maybe,’ Stanton commented. ‘Listen, do you mind if we have a continuous video feed of your office today, Johnno?’

‘Why, pray tell?’ Johnno lightly asked.

‘Don’t start talking like Beesely,’ Stanton complained. ‘I had enough of that posh accent for fifty years. Just be yourself, Johnno. As for the video feed ... if something goes wrong we will have to act quickly, both diplomatically and militarily.’

Johnno glanced at Helen. ‘Fair enough, we’ll set it up.’

‘You can reconfigure this screen,’ Stanton began. ‘Kill the image of us, leave the camera and mic’ on.’

Claus nodded, indicating that they could.

‘OK,’ Johnno offered. ‘All the Ministers are upstairs. Thankfully Max Blaum is breaking the news and smoothing things out, not me. And Helen here can talk nicely to government types, so we should be OK.’

‘And will ... Helen be present whilst the ministers are in attendance?’

‘You didn’t get the memo?’ Johnno teased with a grin.

‘Johnno?’ Stanton called.

‘Helen is now ... Head of Intelligence Operations for K2,’ Johnno informed Stanton.

Stanton stared back. ‘With all the visitors, the British Government will find out sooner ... rather than later.’

‘Leave the UK Government to me,’ Johno said with some menace. ‘We need her expertise and experience here. *Especially* today.’

‘I’ll have to make some calls,’ Stanton offered, sighing. ‘Let our people know *before* it leaks out.’

‘Whatever,’ Johno commented, biting into a doughnut.

Stanton addressed Helen. ‘Dame Helen, at your earliest convenience we would like a long chat with you, Stateside. In the meantime, what’s the plan of action?’

Helen began, ‘We’ll meet now with the managers and troop leaders to discuss the operation, then the ministers, then Johno drives off. Tonight at dusk we close the borders, sealing off Austria. Tomorrow at 11am is a helicopter fly-by, followed by your fly-by at 11.30am. Our troops won’t attack without a signal from Johno. If the deadline is reached and the castle bombed, we’ll secure the area and move in.’

Stanton could be seen making notes. ‘OK. That gives Johno almost twenty-four hours to infiltrate and signal. Besides, knowing Johno, he’ll probably have wrecked the place well before then, intentionally or otherwise.’ Johno laughed, scowled at by Helen and Claus. Stanton added, ‘One more thing. Johno, when *you* cross the border *we* start talking delicately to Rome, if you know what I mean.’

‘You do?’ Johno asked.

‘We don’t want any *additional* problems on the radar. Besides, they deserve the courtesy of a meeting. Problem is, knowing who to talk to on their side. I’ve had meetings before - always a complete denial of everything. Tricky bunch to chat to, but very influential with the Italians, as you can imagine.’

Someone off screen handed Stanton a note. ‘Ah, that yacht stopped dead for twenty minutes, a hundred miles north of Suez.’

‘Take a look now,’ Johno loudly suggested.

‘And if he’s on board?’

‘Tel Aviv mental asylum,’ Johnno coldly stated.

Stanton shook his head. ‘Remind me never to piss you off.’ He drummed his fingers on his desk. ‘OK, the Delta Force Colonel will co-ordinate the Air Force, we’ll watch and comment as we go if you want to test the screen.’

Claus hit a switch at the back of the screen, the digital clock back up.

Helen tapped the phone. ‘Call Mr. Stanton.’

They waited.

‘OK, I can see you, and now hear myself in stereo.’

She hung up as managers appeared in the doorway, waved in.

6

Luchenkov sat back, enjoying the sun, Martini in his hand.

‘What’s that?’ a bodyguard asked, an urgency and fear to his words.

Luchenkov jumped up and quickly scanned the horizon. Nothing. Then he noticed where the man stood pointing, off the side of yacht as it powered quickly towards the north Egyptian coast on a warm and cloudless day.

They could both see a large blackened area, as if passing rocks, slightly darker than the surrounding azure ocean. Luchenkov shouted to the captain to slow down, asking the depth.

‘Three hundred metres’, came back.

More people had gathered at the rear of the quarterdeck and stood peering into the water. A loud metallic clank could be heard, and felt through their feet, soon followed by everyone lurching forwards as the boat suddenly slowed.

‘We hit something!’ a man shouted. ‘Rocks!’

The captain appeared on the desk above them. ‘There are no rocks here, we’re mid ocean!’ he protested.

The boat slowed quickly, losing its momentum. The wash at the rear of the boat dissipated, the large black area still visible.

‘There!’ a man shouted, something now causing a small wake of its own.

‘A whale?’ a woman asked, being ignored.

The conning tower of a submarine started to emerge, a look of abject shock and horror on the faces staring at it as the yacht’s engines were switched off. In silence the large conning tower rose. And rose.

They were now craning their necks to look up at it, their yacht drifting at a slight angle to it. A man raised his hands in surrender. The body of the submarine burst through the surface and rose till it reached twenty feet clear of the swell. Side on now, the black submarine stretched two hundred yards, dwarfing the yacht.

A burst of automatic fire came from the conning tower, everyone on the yacht jumping down as the boat’s controls, and radio, were shot up at length.

‘Prepare to be boarded,’ boomed from a megaphone, a distinct American accent. ‘Any hostile action will result in you being fired upon.’

‘Take a good look,’ the submarine’s Captain suggested to Luchenkov as they backed away from the yacht.

Luchenkov struggled defiantly, held firm by two marines.

‘Any moment now,’ the Captain suggested.

A dull boom echoed across the water. Someone could be seen jumping overboard, black smoke emerging, Luchenkov screaming and struggling.

‘I’d guess the men and women aboard the Ark Royal screamed and shouted,’ the Captain noted, observing the yacht through binoculars.

He faced the prisoner, cold and dispassionate eyes. ‘That was a gas explosion, cooking gas. Happens sometimes. All

the life rafts have been tampered with, satellite beacons removed. So it's either burn, or drown. They'll choose drowning, no one chooses burning.'

The marines winded the struggling prisoner as the Captain lifted his binoculars and studied the scene, the boat burning quickly. 'Sharks are rare in the Med' ... but, you know, fingers crossed.'

Tick that box

1

Managers nestled together, going through the plan of action timeline, diligently being checked and re-checked by Helen.

‘Ma’am!’ burst from the phone. Without waiting the operator said, ‘They have captured Luchenkov!’

Helen stood quickly and headed to the door. ‘I need to use the bathroom.’

Johno immediately went after her. In the ladies he leant against the washbasins as she stood hunched, hands on the cold marble and staring into a sink. ‘OK?’ he softly asked.

‘Kind of forget about him for a moment,’ she quietly replied, looking up and studying her reflection. ‘Been enjoying sitting back in the big chair. Not happy to be a victim again.’ Johno slowly nodded, not sure what to do ... or say. Helen added, barely above a whisper. ‘Deal with it... him, as quietly as you can, I don’t need to know.’

‘Might help if you killed him,’ Johno posed.

‘And it might not,’ she came right back with, still staring into the mirror. ‘I’d kill him for taking my daughter, all the time reminding myself that it was my career that got us here.’ She took a big breath, grabbing a tissue. ‘I need to tinkle, so sod off out the door.’

She returned to the meeting a minute later, no comments made. They went back to the timeline.

* * *

Twenty minutes later the guard commanders were dismissed to their duties, the Ministers stepping in. Helen and Claus stood, greeting each visitor and *abductee* in turn, before arranging refreshments.

From left to right sat: Blaum from Switzerland, Wilhelm from Germany, Novak from the Czech Republic, Lepper

from Austria, Andreas from Slovenia and Varga Paul from Hungary – almost in geographical sequence. The K2 managers sat off to either side.

‘Varga Paul,’ Helen repeated. ‘In English ... Paul Varga.’

The Minister tipped his head and smiled. ‘Our country is the only one in Europe to reverse names. Or as we say, you all reverse *your* names.’ Some of the Ministers smiled and nodded as the man sat.

Helen eased down. ‘I would like to welcome you all to Schloss Diane and K2. Apologies for the mess outside and the building work, we were hit by a cruise missile, as you already know from the television coverage. Some of you already know this organisation, its role and capabilities.’ She lowered her gaze to the desk. ‘Whether you agree with what we do ... is another matter.’ She looked up. ‘For the benefit of some I will say this – we exist with the tolerance of the Swiss Government because we assist the Government here in counter-criminal and counter-terrorist activities.’

The Ministers unfamiliar with K2 listened in earnest.

She took in their faces. ‘In recent months this organisation has become ... *more involved* with such matters due to the arrival here of Sir Morris Beesely, a former manager within British Intelligence. He actively chose to... *seek out* terrorist threats in Europe. Such actions resulted in the successful seizure of Serbian Nerve agent –’ Wilhelm shifted in his seat. ‘- then the prevention of the dirty-bomb attacks on London.’

Vargas cut in, with a slight frown, ‘They were stopped by British Intelligence?’

‘No,’ Helen pointed out, fiddling with her pen. ‘Actually, they were stopped by the dangerous looking gentleman with the large moustache sat right in front of you. He rammed his helicopter into the terrorist car.’

Vargas, plus the Ministers for Slovenia and Austria stared wide-eyed at Johnno, who now waved back.

‘This is Johno,’ Helen offered. ‘Owner of the bank.’

Now the Ministers appeared both confused and shocked.

‘It is correct,’ Blaum offered after some glanced in his direction.

‘You are now the owner?’ Wilhelm puzzled.

‘Beesely is my father,’ Johno pointed out. ‘When he had a stroke I took control. *And* ownership.’

‘Oh,’ Wilhelm let out. ‘I assumed this good lady –’

‘Head of Intelligence Operations,’ Johno offered. ‘She sits and looks pretty, I do the foot work.’

Wilhelm blinked. ‘You own the bank, and you do ... the leg work?’

‘He’ll be going after Shue,’ Helen pointed out. With the Ministers still staring at Johno, Helen continued, ‘Coming back to today’s situation.’ She took a breath. ‘For those of you that don’t know us, K2 is a very capable private intelligence agency. We have several hundred frontline agents and numerous individuals working here from either a *special forces* background, or from intelligence. You will have seen many British ex-SAS soldiers in the courtyard.’

‘And ... *your* background?’ Wilhelm probed.

She took a moment. ‘Former Director of British Intelligence.’ That shocked them, many straightening in their seats. She added, ‘As I said, a very capable organisation. And if any of you gentlemen have any problems that you feel we could help you with in your particular countries, then approach us and let us know.’

She tugged down her jacket. ‘To business, gentlemen.’ She faced Blaum. ‘Does everyone know the basics?’

‘Ministers Wilhelm and Vargas did not have time to be briefed,’ Blaum informed her.

She glanced at them both then took another breath. ‘In 1972 an American bomber crashed off the coast of Sicily. It was carrying two live nuclear bombs.’ Wilhelm stared, Vargas frowning his lack of understanding. ‘That plane was

fished up from the ocean's depths, it's nuclear bombs repaired over the past ten years. Now, today, we are certain that they have been made capable of exploding.'

'My God,' Wilhelm let out.

'Where are they?' Vargas asked, now realising why he was in this meeting.

'They are in Austria,' she informed him.

'Austria!' Wilhelm barked.

Helen nodded. 'In the possession of a reclusive old Nazi art dealer in a cliff top castle.'

'Johan Shue?' Wilhelm gasped.

Helen again nodded, Wilhelm reaching for a glass of water.

'Who is this man?' Vargas asked.

Helen explained, handing over a photograph of the castle, 'He lives in this isolated castle. He was rumoured to be a Nazi during the war and has built his wealth since dealing in stolen art treasures.'

'What does he want with bombs?' Wilhelm asked.

'We have no idea what he wants with them,' Helen flatly answered. 'But we have surrounded his castle and the American Air Force is very kindly flying overhead with a specially equipped plane that can detect radiation on the ground. The bombs are obviously deep underground or they would have shown up by now. The one good thing in our favour is the location, isolated from any population centres.' She ended the sentence facing Lepper from Austria.

'And what are you planning on doing?' Lepper practically demanded.

Helen eased back, considering her response. 'K2 will risk everything to try and get the bombs. And this is where the difficulties come, Minister. We will do so with, or without, the co-operation of you gentlemen.'

Lepper glanced at Blaum, clearly not happy.

Johno eased forwards. 'There *is* an alternate course of action.' The Ministers focused on him as he checked his

nails. 'We pull back and do nothing. Herr Shue is very old, probably in ill health and dying. Since he doesn't have anything to live for he might just blow up Vienna, or Berlin.'

He focused on Lepper. 'Be a pity if the newspapers found out. Guess that would be bad for tourism in Austria,' he carefully mouthed. 'And you, being the Security Chief, I guess the people of Austria would not be *too* happy with you.'

Lepper mopped his brow and took a water. No one said anything for several seconds.

Helen rested her elbows on the desk. 'Gentlemen, we believe that we can deal with this quietly. To do so, and to have the best chance of success, we need the co-operation of you all.' She waited.

'You have the co-operation of Switzerland,' Blaum offered.

'And Germany,' Wilhelm reluctantly offered.

Slovenia and Hungary jumped in quickly with offers to help. That just left Lepper.

He tried to compose himself. And failed, lowering his head. 'I have lost my job, no matter what.'

'Not necessarily,' Johno suggested, Lepper slowly lifting his head. Johno continued, 'If we get in and secure the area quietly, no one will ever know. There may be rumours, which we'll deal with. So, Minister, have faith.'

Lepper took a loud breath. 'What do you need of me?'

'Not much,' Johno suggested. 'Just standby here, ready to help when you're needed. If the Austrian authorities get involved in our action, then *you* 'll need to get involved. And of course, should the Yanks bomb the castle –'

'Bomb the castle!' Lepper exploded.

Johno slowly nodded. 'If we fail to secure the bombs, half the US Air Force will take the top of that mountain off, US Special Forces moving in after. Also, if we do get the

bombs, the Americans will want to remove them safely. Got a problem with that?’

‘Ma’am,’ came from the phone. ‘US Secretary of Defense.’

‘Put him through, screen two.’

The screen came to life, the White House situation room.

‘Minister Lepper. I guess you are now aware of ... the problem.’

Lepper faced the screen, not looking well. ‘And how long have you known?’

‘Not long, K2 contacted us yesterday,’ Hoskins lied, Lepper nodding to himself as he thought. Secretary Hoskins added, ‘Minister Lepper, we will – of course - take no action without the appropriate authority given by your Government. We will only act if you invite us to do so. Fortunately, this castle is isolated - even with an air strike very few people will notice.’

‘Minister Blaum, I took the liberty of requesting the presence of the US Ambassadors to Switzerland, Germany and Austria to join you there. They should be with you in half an hour.’

‘Minister Wilhelm. We will not, of course, launch aircraft from German soil without your permission.’

‘We should, probably, close the border with Austria,’ Wilhelm tentatively suggested, a glance at Lepper.

‘That’s on our list of things to do,’ Helen stated. ‘But not until 8pm tonight. We would like you all to close your borders, calling the move a surprise exercise in response to the previous dirty bomb and its route across Europe. And, given what happened in England, your populations should not object to such exercises.’

‘That is a good idea,’ Vargas suggested. ‘The previous bomb did travel across our country, so no difficult questions.’

Helen scanned the faces. ‘Does anyone have a problem with that?’ she delicately broached.

No one objected.

‘What about Italy?’ Vargas asked.

Helen explained, ‘The Italian ... *authorities* are aware and have taken their own steps.’

She waited a few seconds, but no comments or objections were forthcoming. ‘OK, gentlemen. What I would like to do is to go over our plans with you, in outline.’

Fresh coffees were ordered as Helen began.

2

At 10.30am Johnno plonked down on the dungeon sofa. Thomas had not long crawled out of bed, his hair still wet from his shower. Now he sat opposite Johnno, knees up and hugging a large mug of soup.

‘Ready?’ Johnno quietly asked.

‘I know everything about the Vatican.’

‘How many people did the Catholic Church kill in the dark ages?’

‘Forty million,’ Thomas came straight back with.

‘And how many were women?’

‘Thirty million.’

‘Smart lad. If it’s true, you’ve cited it correctly.’

‘The dark age of the inquisition lasted a hundred years,’ Thomas volunteered.

‘It’s still with us mate. *We’re* ... on trial!’

‘We’ll win,’ Thomas confidently offered.

‘Oh yeah? What do you know that I don’t?’

‘These religious people don’t know how to fight.’

‘Let’s hope not,’ Johnno said with an encouraging smile. You all packed?’ Thomas nodded. ‘Nervous?’ Thomas shrugged, disinterested. ‘We’ll leave in about an hour. Go to the toilet first, get a bite to eat, we won’t be stopping when we go.’

‘It is a one hour drive.’

‘Probably be a bit more. Narrow roads up to his castle, be slow going.’ He studied the lad, wondering if he was simply tired and sluggish, like normal, or now afraid. ‘Helen is doing well,’ he commented. ‘She’ll be organising our backup when we’re in the castle.’

Thomas nodded. ‘Twelve o’clock zero hour, 11.30am fly by, 11am helicopters, border closed at 8pm tonight. I know, and I’ve got tea bags and sugar and powdered milk, spare cigarettes for you and a lighter.’

Johno shot him a questioning look.

‘Caves!’ Thomas said with his eyes forced wide open, causing Johno to laugh loudly.

* * *

‘Cardinal. Welcome. How goes it ... with you?’ Pepi delicately enquired.

‘We have ... used all of our sleeper agents inside K2,’ the Cardinal reluctantly admitted. ‘Now we need your help.’

‘Of course, Eminence. We are, after all, here to help each other.’ Pepi walked around and sat behind his desk, Ramon stood facing him. ‘What would you like of us?’

‘Intercept them if you can, before they reach Shue’s castle.’

‘I believe, Cardinal, if I remember correctly ... that you have people inside Shue’s castle?’

‘We do. They are the last line of defence.’

‘Well then, we shall have to assist our good friends.’

3

Helen stepped into the dungeon forty minutes later, Johno and Thomas tucking into more doughnuts, numerous maps and photographs scattered over chairs, tables and the floor. ‘All set?’ she asked. She remained standing, stiffly stood with hands clasped behind her back.

Johnno noticed. 'All set. Be back before you know it.'

She stood waiting.

'Thomas,' Johnno called, his gaze held firmly on Helen, 'Go test the car, see if it's all right, would you.'

Thomas jumped up. 'I'll drive down the road and back.' He bound out, Helen watching him go.

'Take the broom out ya arse, babes. Sit.'

Helen stepped forwards and sat opposite. She sighed, 'You're risking everything.'

'Everything and nothing, babes.' She shot him a questioning look. 'Last week, would you have risked Mike and Tabitha? No, you loved them to bits, now they've fucked off. Life does that, offers up something nice then snatches it away.' She simply stared back. 'A guard could have killed me yesterday, may do tomorrow. Risk is the same.'

'Not something I'm used to,' she softly admitted, her head lowered. 'I used to drive a desk. War with paperwork.'

'Measured stealth,' he repeated.

She sighed. 'We're ready when you are.'

'I know.' He stood, Helen following him up. 'Don't worry, I'll bring the kid back.'

'Not *only* him I'm worried about.'

'Can't be worried about me,' he softly teased. 'Only had two nights together, and one of those was plutonic.'

'*Platonic*,' she carefully pronounced. 'Besides, people ... are more afraid of losing the future, than losing what they already have.'

He offered her his best, sympathetic look. 'I'll be back. Got something to come back for now.'

'Motivated to return for all your money?'

He closed the gap and held her hand. 'I'll swap the money for you.' Her eyes widened. 'Is that something you can arrange?' he asked.

'Why?' she whispered. 'Why me?'

‘Quality bird,’ he replied with a grin. His features quickly hardened. ‘Can’t say I’ve ever really had any luck with woman. And after I joined the Paras - all attitude, no caring. Preferred a good drink and a fight, to discos.

‘And now ... now I have all the money in the world, *and* I landed myself a top of the range quality bird - bit of posh totty. But don’t, you know, don’t be too overwhelmed by it, I’m crap with relationships and women, so it’s probably less about you and more about me. But what’s here today might not be here tomorrow. So I won’t be getting my hopes up.’

She hugged him. After a moment she said, ‘I suppose I could get away with telling people you’re just my bit of rough.’

Johnno roared with laughter, kissing her on the forehead. ‘OK, posh totty, *bit of rough* has a job to do. Not least, find a car that Thomas hasn’t wrecked!’

‘*He* ... drives far better than you! C’mon, Operation *Double Bluff* starts in a few minutes.’

‘Double Bluff?’

‘It’s official title,’ she said as they walked out.

The Range Rover pulled in slowly and turned in a circle, halting. Thomas jumped down, congratulated by many.

Mavo loudly suggested, ‘If he drives you’ll get there in one piece!’ his words echoing around the courtyard. The assembled troopers laughed, mounting up in vehicles to follow.

Johnno clambered in, Thomas getting into the front passenger side. As they pulled out of the drawbridge Johnno said, ‘UB40, I reckon.’

‘Yes,’ Thomas agreed. ‘And The Beatles.’ He put in the CD. ‘Not too loud, camera here,’ he added, tapping the roof fabric, a small camera protruding. ‘We must throw it away before the castle.’

Johno glanced at it, surprised, turning up the music. At the gates he lowered his window. 'Do some work, you lazy bunch of shirkers!' he shouted as he passed through.

In the office the second screen now displayed several images, some activated, several blank. Johno's car camera nestled top left, helicopter camera images surrounding it. Helen sat, carefully scribing a neat tick next to item twelve on her neatly printed list. Everyone else sat watching the screen, keenly attentive.

She tapped the phone. 'Condor One. Status?'

'Condor One, overhead, five hundred metres.'

'Condor One, advance. Status of Condor two?'

'Condor two, over Walenstadt.'

'Thank you.'

'Ma'am, Herr Johno is taking the road to Zurich?'

'He is?'

'Yes, Ma'am.'

Otto lifted his phone and dialled Johno. 'Johno, you are taking a different route.'

'Yes I am,' came back over the sound of UB40. 'When you figure it out get yourself a biscuit.' He hung up.

'He has modified the plan,' Otto informed Helen. 'Just in case.'

They exchanged a look, Helen adjusting her plan of action.

She tapped the phone. 'Alert Condors and chase vehicles to change of route. Now going via Zurich, use his tracker.'

'This is Mavo', came from the desk phone, albeit with no background music. 'Is he lost already?'

Helen leant closer to the phone. 'No, random course change, just in case.'

'Don't like the sound of that. OK, Mavo out.'

Helen eased back, exchanging looks with Claus and Otto.

The elevated flyover of Route 3, running north up the west side of the lake, led directly into the heart of Zurich. Now Johno came off and circled around several times, Thomas noting number plates, colours, makes and models of cars. He already had the chase vehicles on his list, having memorised their number plates.

At the northern tip of the lake Johno stopped at a set of traffic lights. He had left a small gap ahead of his car, never quite sure where the white line rested in Switzerland, especially not in Zurich. Now a small white car cheekily pulled in front and halted at a slight angle.

Johno and Thomas glanced at each other, Thomas reading the number plate.

‘German,’ Thomas noted. ‘Only one man.’

Johno tooted his horn. The vehicles window came down, a single finger gesture coming back.

‘Well, that was rude,’ Johno said.

‘Very rude,’ Thomas agreed. ‘Shoot him.’

‘Not today, got to get to the big show.’ Johno eased his vehicle forwards till it touched the car in front, a slight nudge. Then he floored the accelerator and pushed the small car forwards five yards, halting and reversing quickly as a tram hit the small white car side-on, pushing it along the cobbled street sideways. Thomas was shocked, but smiled anyway. ‘Today we’ve got to be stealthy and measured in our approach.’

Thomas gave a mocking nod, a broad smile.

* * *

Otto had enlarged the view from Johno’s car. Helen sat with a hand over her eyes, Otto and Claus stood closer to the screen.

‘Measured and stealthy,’ Vargas repeated, shaking his head.

Novak crossed his legs, an unhappy glance at Otto. 'I think the boy should drive.'

Helen jabbed at the phone. 'I want the car that Johnno just rammed to be identified, the driver compensated – provided he agrees not to discuss the matter.'

4

The next forty minutes offered up little more than a pleasant drive, the people assembled in the office listening to the background music of UB40, The Beatles and Ace of Base, several tapping their feet.

'Vehicle has passed Oberdorf,' Otto stated. 'He will soon be to the border.'

'Condor Two to base,' crackled from the phone.

Helen leant forwards, pressing a button. 'Go ahead, Condor Two.'

'Car crash ahead, traffic queuing. Have advised mobile.'

'Thank you.'

* * *

Johnno slowed as the traffic thickened, vehicles moving to the right as a car sat on the left with its hazard lights flashing.

'Four men in the car,' Thomas noted.

'I see them. Helen, stand by, stand by!'

With ten car lengths remaining Johnno brought his Range Rover to a halt, tooted by the vehicle behind, which eased around. In his mirror he could see an estate car then two black Range Rovers. He waited, focused on the halted vehicle, which had obviously not been in any recent collision.

A rifle, a man emerging.

Mavo pulled around, scraping the estate car before he floored it – straight for the halted vehicle, hitting it at around twenty miles an hour.

The man who had been stood outside the vehicle jumped clear, now shooting at Mavo's Range Rover ineffectually with a pistol, the bullets bouncing off the bullet-proof glass. A burst coming from behind Johnno's vehicle took the man down. Mavo reversed back towards Johnno, rear windows now down and troopers hanging out. The ambush car splintered, glass shattering and covering the road as Condor Two opened up with a two second burst. No one could have survived.

Johnno tooted his horn, eased around Mavo and sped off. 'Helen,' he called. 'I'm feeling unloved again.'

'Success is measured –' she began, a faint voice coming from the cameras two-way microphone.

'By how many people try and kill you!' Johnno finished off. He headed along E60 towards the Bodensee and the border.

At the border he showed his Swiss diplomatic pass, getting a wink from the guard.

'Hope he's one of ours,' Johnno told Thomas.

'No, he just likes you,' the boy joked, giggling.

They drove on, the sky mostly clear of clouds, a fresh wind blowing.

'Now we see if Herr Shue is on the ball and expecting us. If he is, he won't ambush us - he'll wait till we're inside. If it's the other mob then they'll try along here, quiet road and no air cover.'

'No helicopters?' Thomas asked, concerned.

'Nope. Someone else's country, so no Apaches damaging things. Well, not till tomorrow.'

Across the border, Route 200 offered quieter roads than Switzerland and more difficult terrain. A silver Mercedes Coupe appeared intermittently in the distance, always a

bend or two ahead along the road, Johnno never catching it. Behind him trailed two black Range Rovers a quarter mile distant, ahead of them a variety of vehicles swapping position every ten minutes.

‘Stand by!’ burst out the microphone, a male Swiss voice. ‘Forest has movement.’

Johnno cruised around a sweeping bend, easing his speed, and down a straight piece of road that was heavily wooded on either side, pine trees rising up steep slopes. ‘Here we go. Get down.’ He slowed.

A car had pulled up on the opposite side another thirty metres along.

‘Bad place for an ambush,’ he muttered.

‘Why?’ Thomas asked, staying low, but peeking out.

‘No escape routes for them. But, if it’s our ... *friends*, then they’re not fussed on escaping.’

Passing the first car he noted someone lying across the back seat, the window open. No sooner had he passed than the man opened up with a pistol, cracking the outer layers of the rear windscreen.

‘Idiots,’ Johnno commented, none too concerned. ‘Fucking pistols.’

Thomas stuck his head up then immediately pointed ahead.

‘AK47!’ he and Johnno said at the same time, Johnno ducking across the gear stick towards Thomas.

The windscreen took six rounds and shattered, the seat rest bursting its stuffing over the two of them. The side window took four rounds and shattered, shards of Perspex catching Johnno in the face.

With a break in the firing he lifted up and hit the accelerator, swerving to avoid running off the road. The silver Mercedes now sped towards him, the vehicle braking hard just past them and blocking the road behind. Johnno pulled-up after fifty yards, drawing his pistol, both of them now peering through the tinted rear windows.

The Mercedes took heavy fire, the driver returning fire with an M4, the shortened version of an M16 rifle. The first K2 chase car had now stopped, exchanging fire with the pistol man, the Range Rovers speeding up.

One powered straight through, swerving around the Mercedes and halting side on. Troopers piled out, heavy fire brought to bear on the trees a second later, four M4s set on automatic fire. Two grenades were launched, loud bangs echoing down the steep-sided valley.

The valley fell quiet. Troopers and guards ran into the trees, checking bodies; three reported dead over the radio.

‘You are bleeding,’ Thomas noted, retrieving a small first-aid kit from his jacket pocket.

Johno wiped his face with a sleeve. ‘How’s it look?’

‘Many small cuts, one bleeding.’ He applied a plaster.

‘Johno! Are you OK?’ crackled from the roof microphone, Helen’s voice.

‘Yeah, fine. Be a bit draughty now.’

‘Swap vehicles,’ she suggested.

‘Negative. This will look more realistic, part of my plan.’

Mavo pulled up alongside. ‘What happened to the music?’

‘You guys OK? Any wounded?’

‘The guy driving the Mercedes is hit, nothing serious by the look of it. You going on like this?’

‘Yep. Perfect actually, Shue will think that K2 tried to stop me.’

Mavo sighed. ‘I hope you know what the fuck you’re doing.’

‘You’re not the only one,’ Johno quipped.

‘Was that guy you shunted into the tram one of them?’

‘No, just an idiot I cured of his road rage.’

Troopers ran up and jumped into Mavo’s vehicle. One waved Johno forwards, leaning out of a window. ‘C’mon, Dancing Queen! Get the Abba wagon rolling!’

‘Follow me,’ Johnno shouted. ‘Hundred yards back.’ He sped off.

The gatehouse that controlled the access road for Shue’s castle was both functional and ornate, a gatehouse for an old estate that did not include Shue’s castle – that had been built much later - and well after the period when castles were of any use to their siege-mentality inhabitants.

The ornate building straddled the road, rising some two storeys high. It reached a cliff on the right, a brisk river on the left and no way past except under its curved arch. The opening was wide enough for one vehicle with plenty of room to spare, a squeeze for two. In front of it sat a cottage facing the river, a sturdy wooden fence running along the river’s side of the road. There did not seem to be anyone around as Johnno approached, so he tooted the horn a few times. He slowed in front of the arch, two surprised men stepping out.

‘They look strong,’ Thomas cautioned in a whisper.

Johnno inched forwards and stopped under the arch, the two men taking in the damage to the Range Rover; the shattered windows and bullet holes.

Johnno stuck his face out the door as the first man drew level, blooded face and band-aids prominent. ‘Hi there.’

The man did a double-take at Johnno, then just stared, his mouth opening. ‘You!’

‘Johnno’s the name, from K2.’

The second man snapped his head around at the mention of K2, a third emerging with a pump-action shotgun and covering the vehicle.

The stunned man eventually said, ‘Why are you here?’

‘I came to see your boss, Herr Sue. He in?’

‘He is not expecting anyone.’

A fourth man appeared, pistol stuffed in his belt.

‘I know, it’s a surprise visit.’

‘Surprise?’ the first man asked, still quietly stunned.

Johno reached down into the seat well and lifted a Nazi-stamped gold bar, dropping it through the window immediately. The man shrieked and hopped backwards, the gold bar having landed on his foot.

‘Sorry,’ Johno offered, hiding a smirk.

The second man picked up the gold bar, examining it, the sight of it bringing the two other men close.

‘I have a thousand more like that,’ Johno suggested.

‘A thousand?’ the second man gasped, the first man still hopping and crying out his pain.

‘I’m going to drive up the castle and show some things to Herr Shue.’ He eased forwards till he became level with the armed men, then pulled away, leaving them watching him go. If either weapon had been fired, pistol or shotgun, they would not have penetrated the rear glass.

At the first tight bend, overlooking the stream, Thomas diligently ripped out the camera and threw it out the window.

‘Good work,’ Johno quipped. ‘I was about to do that. Was waiting to see if *you* remembered.’

Fifteen minutes later they were on an exposed cliff, carefully negotiating the bends.

‘No way they drove the nukes up here,’ Johno commented, shouting above the roar of the wind coming through the broken windows.

‘Another road?’ Thomas queried.

‘A road to the caves somewhere, other side of this cliff.’

‘We are very high.’

‘We’re very fucking cold, I know that!’

They turned a tight corner and rose over the crest of the cliff as the castle came in view, easing to a crawl.

‘Wow!’ Thomas let out. ‘It is beautiful’

‘Nice place to live, bitch to hang out your washing thou.’

The road dipped, winding down towards the narrow bridge that connected the castle to this neighbouring mountain. As they negotiated the narrow bridge the wind-

sheer rocked the car, a stiff cold breeze circulating around the inside of the vehicle. Glancing down from their raised seats the drop was awesome; five hundred metres down. As they pulled in to a halt four men stepped out from a small door at the side of a large wooden gate studded with metal.

‘Prost,’ Johnno offered with a warm smile. He opened his door and stepped down.

‘Your weapon!’ the first man barked.

Johnno opened his jacket slowly with his left hand, revealing his pistol. The man reached in and grabbed it, waving Johnno away from the vehicle and towards the small door. Thomas jumped down, Gameboy in hand, and walked around, offering warm welcomes and a cheery smile. He got nudged towards Johnno as two men closed in on the car, noting the bullet holes.

They opened the boot, finding a dozen gold bars on the boot floor. Lifting the lid to a box they exchanged hurried comments and questions, lifting out part of the Amber Panels and exchanging stunned looks. With one carrying the box, the other keeping his pistol prone, they stepped back around to Johnno.

‘Why are you here?’ one barked, his English accented.

‘That’s between me and Herr Shue. Now, be a love and take what’s in the car to your boss’s office and take our bags to our rooms, there’s a good man.’

The man with the pistol waved Johnno inside. Through the small door they ducked in sequence, turning left onto a long cobbled passageway that housed two cars; an old Mercedes and a new BMW Five Series. Through a thick wooden door on the right they climbed a tightly spiralling set of stone steps up two floors, emerging into a warm corridor, well decorated and with a polished wooden floor.

The first door on the left hung open and revealed a small rest room with a few men sat around. Outside the third door on the left the first gunman knocked, never having taken his eyes, or cold stare, off Johnno. The door was opened from

inside by a guard dressed in black, the man six-foot-six in Johno's estimation. He looked Johno up and down, noted Thomas, then finally stood to one side holding the door. The guests stepped in.

Shue was not clearly visible, the large window behind him letting in the sun and leaving his face in shade. His bald head reflected the sunlight, his body a pyramid of fat with his neck wider than his head, his shoulders sloping.

Johno walked forwards, taking in the room, pleased by the roaring fire. Stepping to it he warmed his hands. 'Nice to see a good old fire. Don't see enough of them these days.'

'Except when you tie someone to a chair ... and set fire to them!' It was Shue, his English good, but his voice oddly distorted by the fat around his chin and cheeks.

'I prefer a bullet myself,' Johno commented without turning around. 'I was a soldier, not like those Swiss freaks.'

'Herr Johno Williams, personal bodyguard to Herr Director Beesely.'

Johno turned, now warming his backside. 'A pleasure Herr Johan Shue.'

'And why are you here?' Shue rasped.

'Hopefully to make some money.'

'Make some ... money?'

The piece of the Amber Panel was brought in and carefully placed down, followed by two gold bars, a painting rested against the desk.

'Ah, exquisite,' Shue rasped, examining the amber. 'I always knew Gunter had it. He denied it of course.'

'Had the spearhead as well.'

Shue looked up. 'The spear?' he barked, an odd sound, as if he might be choking.

'Yeah, but Beesely gave it to the Israelis.'

'He gave it ... to the Jews?'

'Sent to Jerusalem for people to look at. Guess you're not as well informed as I thought you might be.'

Shue held his gaze on Johno for a moment then examined the Amber. 'You have more?'

'I have all of it.'

'And you hope to sell it to me?'

'Or someone you know. Plus get some money for the gold and pictures.'

Thomas removed the shroud and lifted the oil painting for Shue to appraise.

'Ah, I saw this once, during the war. Today ... maybe worth ten million dollars by itself. If ... it is not a trick.'

'A trick?' Johno repeated.

Shue examined a gold bar. Without looking up he commented, 'No one steals anything from K2. Or ever leaves.'

'Who'd you think put the bullet holes in my bleeding car? Check with the police here and Switzerland, they should know about the shoot-outs already.' Shue was surprised, pointing to one of his men, who stepped out. Johno added, now sitting in a comfortable chair, 'And if you check things at Zug you'll see that old man Beesely had a heart attack, the castle was destroyed by a cruise missile fired by Luchenkov, and I'm out of a frigging job as Beesely's bodyguard.'

Shue was again surprised, Johno puzzling his host's lack of knowledge. A moment passed. 'And you have gold? Gunter's Nazi gold, his... reserve?'

'Yep. Thousand bars, more paintings, Roman coins from the complex in Protovin, across the border in the Czech Republic.'

'So, you have the coins?' Shue said, nodding to himself.

'Me and the kid penetrated the complex, had a good look at the Buddha.'

Shue's eyes widened, visible even with the backlight. 'So, you are a very rich man. Which does not explain why you are here.'

‘Simple really. I couldn’t take the treasure far, so I hid it just across the Austrian border and went back. I need to recover it, turn it into cash and fuck off. K2 *will* be looking for me.’

‘You take a big risk, coming here,’ Shue pointed out. ‘I may not believe you ... and throw you out of a window.’

‘No you won’t. At the very least you’ll try and recover the treasure, steal it from me ... and then throw me out the window.’

Shue laughed, a horrible gurgling noise.

‘You didn’t play the part of the green toad in Star Wars did you?’

‘What?’ Shue asked, not fully understanding. His man came back in, looking Johnno up and down. At the desk he confirmed part of Johnno’s story. Shue eased back and faced Johnno. ‘We will need time to check these details.’

‘Yeah, no problem at all. Get me a room for a week or two, safe enough here. You check as much as you like, *me old son*.’ Shue was taken aback. Johnno added, ‘Problem will be K2 finding the panels and gold before *we* get them.’

‘And what do you want for these ...items.’

‘Thirty percent of what you get for them. Then, maybe, I’ll co-operate on the buried Nazi treasures in the Czech Republic.’

‘What treasures?’ Shue sceptically asked.

‘I used to work for British Intelligence. K2 kidnapped the former Direct of MI6 from England, after she was kicked out by the British Government. She read the files from wartime SOE and OSS. She knew, and told me, where the real treasures are buried. Untouched by Gunter.’

That seemed to please Shue, who now stood and waddled around, resting his knuckles on the desk as he progressed. ‘A fortuitous meeting,’ he suggested. Facing one of his men he said, ‘Give him a nice room, the best of everything.’ He turned to Johnno. ‘A very nice jail for a few days, yes?’

‘No problem, I’m not in any hurry.’ Johno stood.

‘You will be searched, of course, and your possessions.’

‘Nothing to hide, you search away. But nothing rectal for the kid, OK?’

Shue laughed, gesturing Johno towards the door with a fat paw of a hand, one set of knuckles still taking his weight on the table. Once Johno and Thomas had left, Shue examined the painting closely.

‘You believe him, sir?’ an aid enquired.

‘We will soon see.’ He straightened, hobbling around to his desk. ‘His treasure will come in useful. I can sell this painting for fifteen million dollars straight away.’

‘And we need the money,’ his aid suggested.

Shue nodded in agreement. ‘Take this painting to Turin, I will arrange the immediate sale. Then buy what we need to finish the bombs, as quick as you can. Order the parts to be ready now.’

The aid directed a guard towards the painting, covering it again in its shroud. It was removed.

Shue ordered, ‘Check our guests and their belongings for bugs. Once we have his treasure, kill them both.’

The aid nodded and left.

The room that Johno and Thomas were led to was both palatial in size and grand in décor; a giant four poster bed, on-suite bathroom, a set of large leather chairs and an adjoining door to another room just as big.

Johno took in the room, closely observed by two of Shue’s men. ‘So what time do we eat?’

‘We can have food brought to you here,’ a guard offered maintaining a hard stare as Thomas peered out of the window.

‘Can’t stay in here for a week,’ Johno said with a shrug. ‘Is there a nice restaurant?’

‘I will ask Herr Shue if you are allowed to use it,’ the same man flatly stated as he began searching Johno. The

second man searched Thomas, who pretended he was being tickled, putting the man off. The boy's search was just a cursory check.

Finally the man stepped back and half turned to his colleague. 'He is clean.'

'Some might argue that one,' Johno muttered. Then louder, 'What do I call you?'

The man hesitated. 'Od.'

'What's odd?'

'My name.'

'Your name is odd?'

'Yes.'

Johno waited. 'Well, odd or not, what's your name?'

'It is Od.'

'Embarrassed, eh?'

Od frowned. 'No.'

'Then what's your name?'

'My name is Od,' Od angrily stated.

'I know it's odd, but what are you called?'

Od glanced at his colleague. 'He is Wolf, I am Od.'

'You certainly are,' Johno said with a quizzical look.

Thomas wandered back in. 'What's odd?'

'He's odd,' Johno indicated.

'What is odd about him?' Thomas asked, looking the man up and down.

Od faced Thomas. In German he angrily stated his name, causing Thomas to laugh. Od turned on a heel and left.

'Strange man,' Johno commented, making eye contact with Thomas.

'His name is Od.'

'I know! But what is it?'

Thomas laughed again. 'His name is spelt ow-dee. Od!'

'Ow-dee. Ah, I see. How odd.'

They laughed as Thomas turned his Gameboy on and selected the desired game. 'Thomas reporting. We are inside, nice room, they are checking our story. Thomas out.'

He selected another game as a compressed and encrypted data-burst was released. With little else to do, they lay on their respective beds, shouting the odd comment back and forth.

Thirty minutes later their bags arrived, obviously searched and hastily re-packed. They unpacked, playing the role as if they may be resident for many days or weeks.

Where's the games room?

1

After checking the windows, and the sheer drop, they both slouched in the room's comfortable leather chairs. Soon bored with that they opened the door.

'Yes?' Wolf curtly asked.

'Got anything we can do?' Johno asked. 'Any facilities here?'

'There is a guest recreational area, swimming pool, sauna and massage.'

'Great,' Johno enthused. 'Where is it?'

'Wait here,' Wolf ordered. He stepped across the wooden corridor floor and lifted a dated wall phone.

'They wish to use the recreational area, sir,' he whispered.

'Good. Use the time to search their clothes thoroughly. Don't make him suspicious, treat him well.'

'Yes, sir.' Wolf hung up and stepped back. 'Follow me, please.'

Johno noted the change in tone, hiding a smile as they followed Wolf down a flight of stairs and along an equally well decorated corridor, until Johno figured they were beyond his room and to the left of it. They entered a reception area, an attractive Chinese girl sat looking extremely bored.

'Guests,' Wolf told her in English.

She seemed surprised, getting into character as Wolf stepped out. 'What would you like, sir?' she asked Johno in reasonable English.

'What's on offer?' he asked with a grin.

She smiled back. 'We have a heated pool, sauna, Jacuzzi and steam room, ice dip and massage tables, sir.'

'Fine. All of the above, in that order.'

She blinked, frowned, then grabbed fresh towels. ‘This way, please.’

The lady led them down a few steps and to the left. ‘Change in here please, there are swimming shorts in a cabinet. You will see the door for the pool. At the end of the pool is the Jacuzzi, you’ll see a door for steam room and sauna, sir. The last door on the left is for massage, sir.’

With a wink for the girl he entered.

Stood upright in the heavily chlorinated pool, after a few lengths, Johnno whispered, ‘Right now they’re bugging our room.’

Thomas nodded. ‘Let’s try the other stuff.’

‘Try all the doors,’ Johnno whispered. ‘Say sorry if you see anyone inside.’

Thomas tried the door to the left of the Jacuzzi, but found it locked. With Johnno in the Jacuzzi he tried the sauna, having a good look around inside, then the steam room. The next door offered up a storage room of some sort with a cold draft from a vent, the next door along the poolside locked, the last one the massage room, the girl sat waiting.

‘Sorry,’ he offered, jumping back into the blue pool and swimming the short distance to Johnno. ‘Nothing,’ he whispered.

They tried the sauna for twenty minutes, Thomas getting bored. Then the steam room, again the lad getting bored with just sitting around, the two of them finally heading for the massage room.

‘You’re too young,’ Johnno said, pushing Thomas into the pool. He stepped into the massage room, noticed a latch and locked the door. ‘So, where do you want me?’

The girl stared at Johnno’s scars, her mouth hanging open. ‘What you do?’

‘I was a soldier, and not a very good one – kept getting shot,’ Johnno explained, wrapping a towel around his shoulders for warmth.

Quietly shocked, she led him to another room; classical music playing, lights turned down low, the air fragrant.

Johnno lay down on the towelled bed, his face in the hole provided. She towelled him dry before sprinkling oils onto his back and legs. ‘Don’t worry about hurting me,’ he said through the hole, looking down at the wooden floor and her red toenails. ‘I want a hard massage.’

She began the massage. ‘You are guest here?’

‘Kind of, yeah. I brought some paintings for Herr Shue to buy.’

‘Oh,’ she muttered.

‘You don’t sound sure.’

‘Oh, just ... men say he very small money now.’

Johnno stared at the floor. ‘Really? So what does he spend his money on?’

‘He only spend money on equipment now.’

‘What equipment?’

‘I don’t know name, what it do. Very big money for Rover.’

‘Rover?’

‘Rover in water, it name.’

‘Underwater ROV,’ Johnno muttered, staring hard at the floor. ‘Odd’

‘He here, too. He is nice man.’

Johnno smiled widely, that movement restricted by the sides of the whole pressing against his cheeks. ‘What’s the name of the big man?’

‘He name Dolf.’

‘Is *he* a nice man?’

‘No, he always loud to me.’

‘And what about Herr Shue? He a nice man?’

‘He no come here, he no like women,’ she giggled. ‘He no have pee-pee.’

‘No pee-pee? Ouch!’

‘He like this in war.’

‘Ah, had his ... *pee-pee* shot off in war. What’s your name?’

‘Li Xang.’

‘Well, Li, let me ask you a question. If you wanted to go home, would Herr Shue let you go home?’

She did not answer, simply continued the massage. A minute later Wolf entered and sat in the corner, winked at by Johnno. He had not noticed Johnno’s scars as he had entered, but as Johnno lifted up and stood some twenty minutes later Wolf stared, clearly surprised. Johnno smirked at him then went back to the pool, Thomas nowhere to be found.

* * *

Thomas’s entry back into the corridor went unnoticed. As requested, he started trying doors – not realising that Johnno had only intended that approach to be used in the pool area. Thomas was taking his instructions literally.

Most doors would not open. One was a cupboard, but the fourth door on the left did open, revealing an unoccupied office. Glancing back along the corridor and checking the ceiling for cameras, like those everywhere in Zug, he entered, easing the door closed behind him.

The office desk had an old IBM computer that would not switch on and draws that were locked. The papers on the desk related to guests in the main, some art galleries and business deals the remainder. The cabinets were, again, locked, some books checked to see what they were; nuclear bomb assembly not amongst them.

The window opened with a gentle shoulder to it, a strong breeze cooling his wet hair as he looked down and then up. Closing it he tried a side room, finding numerous tall cabinets in a room a quarter of the size of the main office.

The door handle to the office clicked. Thomas froze. Very delicately, he stepped between two cabinets, squeezing behind one. Someone stepped in, glancing around the cabinets briefly before closing the door. Thomas let out his breath as quietly as he could then eased out inch by inch, finally kneeling at the door and peeking through the keyhole. A cool draft irritated his eye.

‘Nice man’ Od knelt, holding something, saying ... saying his prayers. In Latin. Thomas looked away, the cool breeze making his eye water.

Five minutes later the office door slammed. With his ear to the keyhole’s cool breeze Thomas listened. Nothing, but he gave it a full minute. Finally he turned the handle slowly, holding the door with his foot. Holding his breath he eased back his foot till he could get an eye in the crack. Nothing. He eased out.

With an ear against the main door he listened a further full minute. All quiet. At a determinedly slow and painstaking pace he turned the handle, again a foot at the base. With the handle fully turned he eased it open a crack, finding the corridor empty.

He quickly stepped out and along the corridor, leaving the office door ajar. The next door that he tried opened, straight into the staff canteen, a dozen faces focussing on him. ‘Hello,’ he politely called. ‘I was hungry. Can I take something to my room, please?’

By co-incidence, Od served him; meat and potatoes. ‘Here. Take this and go.’

‘Thank you,’ Thomas offered, taking the tray. He remembered the way back, passing numerous perplexed looking guards on the way to his room. Everything looked the same, but his Gameboy was not where he had left it. He smiled, plonked the tray down and tucked in.

Johno arrived under escort twenty minutes later. ‘You had some grub?’

‘Yes, from the men’s canteen. It’s OK.’

When Wolf closed the door, Thomas crossed his lips with a finger.

Johno nodded his understanding. 'Could have got some for me.'

'You pushed me in the swimming pool, smelly arse.'

Johno opened desk draws till he found a pad and pencil. He quickly scribbled a note for Thomas, asking if he found anything. Thomas wrote a reply, finishing with a smiley-face: Went into office. No thing about bums. Od was praying.

Johno tapped the last sentence, Thomas looking up with a quizzical frown. Johno clasped his flat hands together as if praying, then made the sign of the cross.

'Yes,' Thomas confirmed.

Johno shook his fist and made the sign of the cross again.

'Ah!' Thomas whispered. 'He is ...?'

Johno nodded, a finger to his lips. A ten-minute earnest search by both of them revealed no hidden cameras in either room, but several well-placed bugs were left in-situ.

A knock at the door came a minute later and Wolf stepped straight in without waiting, placing down a tray of food for Johno. Figuring they wouldn't poison him, not just yet anyway, he tucked in. When finished he kicked off his shoes and lay on the bed, lighting up.

With the layout of the castle in mind he checked his watch, considering scenarios. Two hours till 8pm and the first variable in play. The painting should be verified by then. Probably. Nope, he remembered, K2 would have to grab anyone leaving. Probably. Gold was not a problem, that proved itself. Shue calling people in Switzerland was covered, unless they had penetrated the management.

But Shue's lack of knowledge remained a concern. Shue had accelerated the process of putting the bombs together when Gunter died and Beesely arrived in K2, but there was no evidence of any spies in K2, no up to date intelligence. And the masseur said he was short of cash? Taking any

aggressive move would be folly before the morning. He stubbed out the cigarette and closed his eyes, Thomas exploring every inch of their large rooms.

2

Johnno woke to find Wolf and Dolf at the end of the bed, Thomas laughing.

‘Was I snoring?’ Johnno asked, easing up and yawning.

‘I could hear you outside of the door,’ Wolf noted in his accented voice. ‘You will join Herr Shue for dinner at 8pm.’

Johnno checked his watch. ‘Best have a shower then.’

He started to undress. ‘Unless you have strong stomachs I’d suggest you turn around, or I’ll put you off your food.’

The guards headed towards the door, Dolf taking a look back over his shoulder. Johnno slipped off his shirt a second after they had closed the door and stepped towards the shower, signalling Thomas to follow. With the shower running he whispered, ‘Find anything?’

Thomas smirked and nodded. ‘I can get out,’ he whispered.

‘Just you?’ Thomas nodded. ‘Small hole?’ Again the boy nodded. Johnno turned the shower off. ‘Good. Now sod off while I have a shit.’

‘Err.’ Thomas ran out, slamming the door.

Their dinner escort arrived at three minutes to eight, Johnno stood ready in a clean shirt, jacket on.

Counting his paces, Johnno followed Wolf and another escort along the corridor, taking the stairs at the end up one flight and back past Shue’s office, another two doors and then a larger room with a huge fireplace, a good log fire roaring.

This new room housed an antique wooden table, seats for ten people with Shue sat at the head, his back to the open fire. The bare stone walls were reminiscent of parts of the

Schloss Dianne, these adorned with numerous paintings, swords, horns and coats of arms. Shue waved the two of them over, Dolf now sitting on his right, Od already sat with three other men. Wolf and the second escort sat themselves after the guests had settled.

‘No napkins?’ Johno teased.

Shue chuckled, a nod at Wolf and some napkins produced, placed down in the middle of the table. The places had already been set, the centre of the table hosting numerous large white china bowls with lids, some with ladle handles protruding. Johno could feel the warmth of the fire on his left cheek, a cool breeze on his right.

‘Excuse me, sir?’ Thomas asked Shue. ‘May I know what are we having?’

‘A polite boy,’ Shue commented, rasping. ‘Swiss by birth, adopted by you. A strange marriage.’

‘Oh, we’re not marred or anything,’ Johno idly noted, causing Thomas to laugh.

Shue glared at them for a second then chuckled. A steaming metal pot was brought in by an old woman, who was obviously strong enough to carry the heavy offering. She placed it down and removed the lid, withdrawing without any curious glances toward Johno or Thomas. She either did not notice, or did not care, Johno considered. Shue eased up as the guards waited, spooning out a small portion of the dish. Johno peered across, but could not identify it: brown broth with large lumps of what looked like beef.

As Shue sat he gestured towards the guests. ‘Guests first.’

The ‘guests’ lifted up and walked around with their plates, both helping themselves to large portions. The guards took the lids off the china, revealing a variety of greens and some potatoes. They started to place food on their plates, each getting some of the boiling meat concoction in turn. For five minutes nothing was said as the guests munched noisily, being carefully observed.

‘Herr Johnno,’ Shue began, his words even more distorted than previous due to the host talking with his mouth full. ‘I understand you are badly scarred.’

‘Inside and out,’ Johnno quipped, continuing to eat.

‘My men have ... strong stomachs if you wish to show them.’

Johnno glanced at Shue, at his guards, finally giving a shrug. He stood, placed his jacket on the back of his chair and unbuttoned his shirt. He took it fully off, smirking at Dolf before doing a turn for them all. ‘Shot seven times, stabbed, burnt and beaten. The scars in my arse come from a grenade trap in a cave complex in the Czech Republic.’

‘We will save the men *that* sight,’ Shue suggested with a smile.

Johnno put his shirt back on, buttoned up and sat, leaving his jacket off, rolling up his sleeves before returning to what remained of his meal and noting the changed expressions of the guards.

‘So, Herr Johnno,’ Shue began. ‘Tell us something of your exploits and your work.’

‘I started with the Parachute Regiment when I was seventeen, saw action in the Falklands War and Northern Ireland, then joined the SAS.’

Some of the guards looked mildly surprised, carefully suppressing their feelings.

Johnno continued, ‘I did nine years in the SAS, lot of travel, killed a lot of people. After that I worked freelance for British Intelligence, MI6, for ... well, up till Beesely got to K2 really. Beesely used to run a private security company in the UK and we did jobs for the British Government.’

‘And you were shot ... in Kosovo,’ Shue stated.

‘Shot seven times and left for dead,’ Johnno commented, finding it hard to maintain his smirk.

‘And what will you do ... with your money, in the future,’ Shue posed, still talking with his mouth full.

‘Get to Central America, Panama maybe, sit on beach.’ He shrugged, grabbing some bread.

Shue nodded to himself as he ate, studying his visitor. The door flung open and a guard ran in, straight to Shue and immediately whispering in his ear, finally standing behind his boss and staring at Johnno.

‘I cleaned the shower after I used it,’ Johnno offered. ‘Flushed the toilet with the big skid mark.’

Shue glared. ‘All of the borders of Austria have been closed.’ His guards were clearly stunned, glancing at each other. Shue pointed Wolf towards the door, the man bolting out. ‘Is there something you are not telling us?’ Everyone focused on Johnno.

‘I stole a lot of treasure.’ Johnno shrugged. ‘Interpol is in the pocket of K2, and they’ve figured I hid it in Austria. I told you that.’

‘You did,’ Shue agreed.

Wolf returned. Stood near the door he stated in German, ‘No problems with the gate house or the local town, no police, nothing.’ He stepped back out.

Johnno made eye contact with Shue. ‘If they knew I was here they would come here, not close the borders.’ He ate his bread, seemingly unconcerned.

‘Where ... did you hide the treasure?’ Shue delicately enquired.

Johnno smiled. ‘Not sure really. An abandoned mine or cave of some sort, about twenty kilometres inside the border. I’ll recognise it when I’m closer.’ He shrugged again, trying some cheese.

‘And when do you plan on ... retrieving it?’ Shue asked.

‘When the police have lost interest, of course - week or two. Like I said, I’m in no hurry. Can’t go for it now, police everywhere.’

Shue studied Johnno intently for many seconds. ‘You have the panels.’ It was a realisation, not a statement or question.

‘How much are they worth?’ Thomas asked Shue.

‘To the right people, perhaps a fifty million Euros.’

‘Sweet,’ Johnno said, an encouraging smile for Thomas.

‘And the gold?’ Thomas asked.

‘How much did you take?’ Shue asked Thomas directly.

‘Big lorry full. But now it’s all dirty’, the boy responded.

‘Dirty?’ Shue repeated.

‘Johnno lifted the back of the lorry and it fell into a cave, all mud and water,’ Thomas lied. ‘Will that make it worth not so much?’

Shue laughed. ‘No, gold is not affected by ... mud.’

Several wine bottles were brought out, Shue confirming the selection, a crate of bottled German lager placed down.

3

The Italian Prime Minister, Bernado Totti, sat listening to two of his Ministers, a late meeting that had become ‘dinner in’ at his residence.

An aid stepped in, his features betraying his concern. ‘Sir. The Swiss have started an ... exercise of some description, they have closed their border with Austria, checking all lorries crossing the border.’

Totti eased back, a questioning look for his security Minister, who’s mobile phone now rang.

The man excused himself and stood away from the table. Returning he said, ‘The Slovenians and Hungarians have closed their border with Austria. An exercise, apparently.’

Everyone at the table now placed down their cutlery and glanced at each other.

The aid’s mobile rang, a quick conversation. He turned back to the table. ‘Prime Minister, the Germans have closed their border with Austria, also the Czech Republic.’

Everyone stood, chairs moving backwards and scraping the floor.

‘This is unprecedented!’ Totti gasped. ‘Only a meeting of European Union Security Ministers could authorise such a move.’

Another call was received by the Security Minister, everyone waiting expectantly. The man looked pale. ‘Swiss, Germans and Czech’s have soldiers on their borders, issued with live ammunition and with medics in attendance.’

A chorus of hurried whispers shot around the room.

‘Call their Ambassadors,’ Totti ordered. ‘All of them. Now.’ He stepped to the window and lifted his mobile. A few moments later he began, ‘Apologies, Your Eminence, but a ... *situation* has arisen. All countries bordering Austria have closed their borders, police and soldiers now manning them. And, with your recent interest...’

‘Why would they do such a thing?’ a voice asked.

‘We are investigating. But this is highly unusual, Your Eminence. In fact, unprecedented.’

‘It is also noteworthy in the fact that all borders are closed ... except ours.’

‘K2 could not have orchestrated such a move,’ Totti insisted.

‘Whatever they fear crossing *their* borders, is being shepherded towards *our* northern border.’

‘I will close the border immediately. Sorry to disturb you, but you did ask to kept informed.’ He hung up.

Totti sat quietly concerned. The majority of his cabinet had arrived at his residence, now assembled around a large table as if a cabinet meeting was in progress.

‘Sir,’ an aid called. ‘The majority of the Ambassadors were just as surprised as we were - they did not know.’ Totti eased upright, frowning in disbelief. The aid quickly added, ‘Sir, the *entire* Swiss Army has been mobilised, and reserves. The Germans have sent many companies south and the Czechs have also mobilised several companies. But that’s not all, sir.’

Totti had been staring out of focus as he thought. Now he made eye contact with his aid.

The aid added, 'All American Air Force bases here and in Germany are on full alert, their aircraft being made ready. Our people here say that live bombs are being made ready.'

'Have we closed our border?' Totti whispered, his voice failing him.

His aid nodded. 'We have moved two companies to the border.'

'Sir!' a man called, approaching. 'A senior American diplomat is here to explain the situation in Austria.'

'Ah...' Totti let out, brightening. 'Show him in.'

'Her ... sir.'

The smartly dressed diplomat walked in a minute later with a male assistant. She wore a blue suit with a large shimmering brooch, her hair carefully styled, appearing to be in her mid forties.

She extended a hand. 'Barbara Stanton.' They shook. 'And this is Paul Rodick,' she added. Her assistant bowed politely and they shook. Taking in the busy room Ms Stanton asked, 'Is there somewhere we can talk? Just ... us?'

Totti stood momentarily surprised before leading the visitors to a side room, refreshments offered and, oddly, refused. 'I hope you can explain this situation,' Totti sighed.

Ms Stanton studied Totti for several seconds. 'Some ... suspect that interested ... *religious* parties have been trying to ... dare I say it, assassinate the owner of K2.'

Totti's eye widened. 'Why not get straight to the point, Ms Stanton.'

'We Americans usually do.'

Totti hesitated. 'What do you know of this ... *aforementioned* ... *hypothetical* situation, and what is *your* interest?'

‘Our interest is at the ... *highest* level. The owner, rather... *owners*, of K2 ... work in very close co-operation with the CIA.’

‘I must confess, that leaves me *more* confused, given recent ... *reported problems* there – with CIA agents.’

‘Things are never ... *quite* what they seem.’

‘So, what is happening in Austria this evening?’

‘K2 are staging a large-scale assault on the castle residence of Herr Johan Shue – the art collector.’

‘Ah, the fog is lifting a bit. But just a bit. May I enquire as to why you, and these other nations, are co-operating in this clandestine manner?’

‘In 1972 one of our nuclear bomber aircraft crashed off Sicily –’

‘I remember it well,’ Totti put in. ‘I was but a virgin politician.’

‘And how quickly you lost it,’ Ms Stanton said with a grin, Toti not amused. ‘The plane was recovered from the ocean’s depths, by Herr Shue.’

Totti straightened in his chair. ‘He has the bombs?’

‘And has fully repaired them, ready for use.’

‘My God!’ Totti gasped. ‘And what ... *use* might that be?’

‘We’re not sure, hence the assault on his residence,’ Ms Stanton stated.

‘Why K2, and not Austrian authorities?’ Totti puzzled.

‘First, the Austrian authorities may tip off Shue. Second... deniability –’

‘Should something go wrong,’ Totti finished off. ‘Besides, K2 will help you keep it out of the papers!’

‘For the benefit of us all, Mister Prime Minister,’ Ms Stanton firmly pressed with a neutral smile.

Totti nodded his understanding, easing back.

‘So you can see, Prime Minister, that we do not appreciate... *outside* interference.’

‘Of course,’ he came quickly back with, a forced, diplomatic smile.

‘So we would appreciate you making some calls, hypothetical calls, to any parties that may have *issues* ... with K2. If not -’ She shrugged. ‘- we will become very upset with ... *these persons* that have issues, with K2.’

That sounded like a threat, and registered like a threat.

‘Perhaps, if this had been known before ...?’ Totti unhappily nudged.

Ms Stanton smiled. ‘Someone recently quoted me a phrase – Groups within groups, secrets inside secrets, lies on top of lies.’

Totti smiled back. ‘Sounds like a politician!’

‘It’s a fine line, politics ... and secret agencies.’

Totti lifted his eyebrows. ‘Especially in *this* country!’

4

Johno had succeeded in convincing everyone at the table that he had drunk too much. Considering what he had drunk, even Thomas thought Johno genuinely incapacitated. Wolf and Od helped Johno back to his room, dumping him on the palatial bed.

Thomas checked the door then poked Johno. Johno opened one eye and held a finger to his lips. Sitting up he shook his head before tip-toeing to Thomas’s bathroom and splashing cold water on his face, Thomas turning the shower on.

Johno whispered, ‘I always knew ... that learning to drink heavily ... would come in useful some day!’

Thomas laughed quietly.

‘Back in the Army ... we learnt to drink hard, and now it’s paying dividends.’ He opened the small bathroom window and breathed fresh air. ‘OK, smart arse, report in, then we go hunting.’

Thomas grabbed the Gameboy and selected the correct game, renamed to 'Kong has a big donger'. 'Thomas reporting. Johnno has had a skin-full, now we're going to search the castle. All going to plan. Thomas out.'

The encrypted burst transmission headed towards the appropriate satellite.

* * *

Several Ministers remained in the office as the message got relayed, the screen now showing thermal images of Shue's castle.

'Skin full?' Novak repeated.

'Some sort of code?' Vargas asked.

Novak faced him, a disappointed look. 'It is a British term. It means ... to be drunk.'

'He is drunk?' Vargas queried.

'He is pretending to be drunk,' Helen firmly intimated, relying on Vargas buying that line.

* * *

'OK, smart arse, how we getting out?' Johnno whispered.

Thomas grinned. 'Three ways out. One, out the window and down. It is the window for the cupboard below my window. It has a piece of metal sticking out, I saw it.'

'OK, what else? I'm a bit drunk for any spider man shit.'

Thomas tapped the bathroom floor with his foot, next to a drain. 'Look.'

Johnno eased down and peered through the covering. Beneath it he could see a drain at least twelve inches square, a strong smell of chlorine evident. 'Goes to the pool.' He clambered awkwardly back up, sighing loudly. 'No way out from the pool!' he whispered.

Thomas jumped up onto the large marble sink and reached up, tapping the ceiling; it was obviously hollow.

Holding his hands apart he indicated the size, wide enough for Johno, who now gave a thumbs-up, resting on the toilet.

Using his leg knife, which had still not been spotted, Thomas lifted a hand towel and stabbed upwards through the towel, plaster falling away immediately. Being as helpful as his stupor would allow, Johno threw large bath towels onto the floor beneath Thomas, masonry hitting the towels silently.

Ten minutes later Thomas signalled Johno, needing a lift up. Johno clambered onto the sink, interlacing his fingers and making a step for the boy. Thomas shot up and disappeared into the blackness.

His head popped out a second later. 'It is big, but very dirty.' A dead pigeon came down, landing in the sink.

'Wait,' Johno told him.

Johno jumped down, rubbing his knee, and grabbed a small chair from Thomas's room. Placing it on the large sink top he scrambled up, stood on it bent double, wobbled, then reached up into the hole. Seeing now where the wooden beams were he placed elbows on them and tried to squeeze through, a foot smashing the sink light. With the side of a shoe on the top of the sink mirror he eased upwards and through, his eyes adjusting to the dark.

'Hey?' he called, pointing the opposite way to Thomas's progress. 'That way.'

'It does not go far!' Thomas whispered, returning, balancing his feet on the beams.

Johno surveyed the three-foot high crawl space, finding uneven rocks jutting out. Only then did he realise that the rooms had been carved out of rock and then plastered, a false ceiling to the rooms.

'OK,' he whispered. 'You go and look, make a small hole and peek down.'

Thomas turned and headed off, making quick progress, nimble and adept at the animal-like crawl. Figuring he now reached beyond Johno's room he made a small hole, a tiny

shaft of light penetrating the gloom. He eased down into the press-up position and put his eye to it. Another bedroom, just like the others. He pressed on.

The result of drinking a lot of German lager is a lot of excess urine. Johno had to go. Crouching over the hole he aimed for the sink and emptied his bladder, finally zipping up. His aim was well off.

Thomas dug another small hole, twisting his knife: a storeroom of some sort, door on the right, leading into the corridor where Wolf stood guard. He pressed on, no longer visible by Johno. The end wall loomed, one more patch of ceiling to try. A small hole revealed a stairwell, a cool breeze blowing through the opening. He hurried back and beckoned Johno onwards. When back over the stairwell he started to widen the hole, lifting plaster carefully and placing it off to one side.

Crunch!

Thomas snapped around, Johno lifting his foot from the ceiling plaster of Thomas's room. They both froze and listened. Nothing. Thomas returned to the hole as Johno pressed on.

Crunch!

Thomas snapped around again, shaking a fist at Johno as the grown-up pulled a foot out of his own room. With Thomas now observing, Johno progressed awkwardly forwards before putting his foot through the storeroom ceiling. Thomas cursed at length in German, whispering the insults.

Finally Johno reached him, resting on a beam and breathing heavily.

Still cursing, Thomas quickly opened up the hole. Gripping a beam above the hole, he climbed down, a drop of some three feet to the top of the steps, landing in a sprinkling of plaster and loosening more. Johno tried to ease down, his legs grabbed by Thomas, his elbows bringing

down a large piece of plaster – K2’s finest landing in a heap on their backsides and covered in white dust.

The door to the corridor remained closed, carefully observed for several tense seconds, before they eased up and headed down the stairwell as fast as they could. Three floors down they reached the cobbled road and the cars, the main drawbridge door on the left. No one was about, the two of them waiting twenty seconds in the stairwell just in case and both of them starting to feel the chill.

They eased out, walking slowly alongside the cars to the far end. An open door across the cobbles led to a workshop of some kind, littered with equipment.

‘Bomb equipment,’ Johno whispered.

Through the darkened room they stepped softly, the only illumination being the dim grey moonlight penetrating several small square windows. To the immediate right of the door a small archway led through to a long room with a low ceiling, numerous boxes lining the walls.

Johno turned a light on briefly, enough to see that the boxes had once carried explosives, all now empty. He knocked off the light and led Thomas to the end of the room, the chill growing. At the end of the room a weak light illustrated a spiral stairwell going down.

‘It goes down to the caves?’ Thomas whispered, leaning in and peering down, his hands on his knees.

‘Yep. All ten thousand fucking steps!’

‘We can use the lift.’

‘They’ll hear it,’ Johno insisted, now wishing he had not drunk so much. He sighed, ‘OK, here goes nothing.’

They started down, holding dearly onto the cold metal hand railing. Fifteen minutes later and Johno’s forehead glistened, his sweat cooled by the breeze. They stopped and rested, breathing heavily.

‘Didn’t we ... do this before ... somewhere?’ Johno asked, panting.

Thomas laughed. ‘We are experts.’

Johno took a big breath, wiped his face with a sleeve and plodded on, his knee aching. Twenty minutes later they hit bottom, finding a heavy door. It was locked.

‘We must go back up?’ Thomas asked.

‘Not in this lifetime,’ Johno said, sitting on a cold stone stair. ‘Use your knife on the hinge bolts.’

Thomas examined the old hinges, the flattened pinheads easily accessible. Ten minutes of diligent work and they were off. Johno jabbed the knife into a crack on the right, twisted it – gaining some purchase – and pulled, the door opening against the lock. With a determined yank they broke the lock with a loud crack, resting the door against a whitewashed wall.

Stepping inside the tunnel the air felt immediately cold and damp, a familiar smell. Finding a light switch Thomas turned it on, making Johno jump before he realised. With Johno regaining his composure they walked briskly forwards.

‘Will there be people here?’ Thomas asked.

‘Dunno. But they probably won’t be down here now, it’ll be locked up for the night.’

Fifty yards in and Johno stopped dead.

‘What?’ Thomas whispered.

‘Is this fucking tunnel big enough for nuclear bombs?’

Thomas glanced over his shoulder. The corridor was wide enough, just, for the two of them side by side. ‘No.’

‘So this is an access tunnel, not the main one.’ They pressed on, reaching another door.

Johno turned off the light and slowly turned the handle, finding it locked. Knocking the light back on he elbowed Thomas towards the hinges. ‘Open it, there’s a good lad.’

With a sigh, Thomas got to work, Johno leant against a wall and lighting up.

The hinges took ten minutes, Johno tackling the stubborn top hinge. Grabbing the hinges he pulled the rightmost edge of the door backwards, then tried to ease it

around quietly, pulling the lock's bolt out of its housing instead of snapping it. Placing it against the wall they found a large cave some ten metres high, a pearl-string of lights poorly illuminating it as it ran left to right.

'Wait,' Johno whispered. 'I've got to go.' He stepped back a few paces and dropped his trousers, crouching down.

Thomas dropped to his knees and peeked out, checking left and right. No one was visible, but the sound of equipment could be detected on the breeze. He ducked back inside. 'Mein Gott! What is that smell!'

Johno zipped up, pushing the boy into the tunnel. 'Remind me to change my pants.'

'Err.' They stepped into the middle of the large tunnel.

'Which way,' they said at the same time.

Johno explained, 'The stairs ... were on the left of the castle, the north. We went down, I think we then turned ... west. So this runs north to south, north on the right. If I remember the picture of the mountain, the big bit is on the right. No, left.'

They turned right, negotiating the uneven stone floor, tripping several times. Fifty yards in a side tunnel appeared through the dark only after they passed it beyond it. Both could feel the stiff breeze.

Johno whispered, 'That leads to the river, I reckon.'

They followed the smaller tunnel, stepping carefully in the dim light offered by roof-mounted bulbs. Soon, grey moonlight could be seen. Beyond where they now stood the tunnel was cut by a heavy metal grill, its bars two inches thick. The grill housed a small door, welded into place, no way past – but tested with a good kick.

Peering through the grill Johno could see the river in the distance, figuring they were at least a fifty feet above it. They doubled back. At the t-junction with the large tunnel they stopped, an ear to the breeze.

'Sounds like equipment,' Johno suggested.

‘From that way,’ Thomas suggested, indicating the left. They turned right.

* * *

‘Johno and Thomas in the caves, Ma’am,’ burst from the phone.

Helen checked her watch, Claus looking across. 1am.

The operator added, ‘Man and boy seen from across the river on thermal cameras, cave exit North-West Alpha.’

Claus stepped around and glanced at the map, Helen placing a finger on the indicated cave.

‘They are progressing well,’ Claus offered.

Helen made no comment, idly tapping her pen.

* * *

Advancing slowly, K2’s intrepid explorers listened intently as they progressed, the tunnel sides dark enough for someone to have been stood there without being noticed. The tunnel curved to the left, seemingly following the contours of the mountain. A large yellow plastic box offered torches, gas masks, light sticks and first aid packs. Delighted with the find, Johno stuffed his pockets before they set-off again.

The sound of machinery reduced to almost nothing as they progressed, confirming now that they were moving away from whatever was generating the sounds. Another small tunnel on the right got diligently checked, again a heavy metal grill blocking any exit towards the river.

5

Wolf stepped into Johno’s bedroom, immediately noticing the empty bed, the room dimly lit by the light coming from a crack in Thomas’s room door. Turning on the lights Wolf

noticed the plaster on the floor. Snapping his head up he could see the small hole made by Johnno's foot.

With his pistol out he burst into Thomas's room, noting the exact same style of hole in the ceiling and puzzling it, before stepping cautiously into the bathroom, weapon prone. He found towels everywhere covered in plaster, a large hole in the ceiling, a strong smell of urine, the dead pigeon, broken glass and steam from the shower. He turned the shower off.

Running out to the corridor he shouted 'ALARM!' before checking the next bedroom, finding plaster on the floor and a similar small hole. He took a moment and stared at it, a heavy frown forming. In the locked storeroom he found the very same hole, plaster on the floor. 'Was is los?'

Guards appeared, Wolf directing them to the stairwell. Crunching through plaster and cursing they raced down.

* * *

'Vot is it?' Thomas called.

Johnno stopped and backed up, shinning his torch towards where Thomas was pointing. On the wall hung a detailed diagram of the cave, illuminated with a flickering fluorescent light that had seen better days.

They could see the stairwell from the castle and the long narrow tunnel clearly illustrated, the lift and another tunnel, wider but shorter, the large tunnel they were in curving around in a half circle then the small exists to the cliff face near the river. Holding a finger on the dusty metal plate, Johnno could see that the cave they were in stopped not far ahead. According to the diagram it dropped down some fifty metres and then ran forwards, opening into a large cavern – painted blue – then continued on the far side of the cavern, rising straight up and then doubling back to a dead end and a large chamber.

‘That’s water,’ Johno whispered, a finger on the blue.
‘The massage girl told me he has underwater equipment.’

‘What for?’

‘I’ve ... no idea. C’mon, dead end this way, unless we want to swim.’

Turning back they progressed in the direction the cold breeze now led them.

‘We need an English Army cuppa,’ Thomas suggested, both now chuckling quietly.

Back at the small tunnel leading off to the stairs they paused and checked it, before continuing along the larger tunnel, the opposite direction to their initial trek.

* * *

Wolf and Od panted heavily as they negotiated the steps down, the other guards in the lift. Reaching the first door they stopped and drew weapons, both panting and sweating. They bent double, catching their breath and observing the detached door and how it had been opened.

When recovered they advanced along the tunnel, weapons ready, their footfalls echoing. Nearing the next door their nostrils registered their complaint.

‘My God! What is that smell?’ Wolf whispered.

Then they noted what Johno had left behind, stepping around it and holding their breath, puzzling just why it had been left. In the large tunnel they decided to check the dead end first, it would be quick.

* * *

K2’s finest inched cautiously along, the sounds of machinery growing. The lights in the ceiling increased in brightness, the tunnel floor now seemingly well used. Rounding a corner, and noticing a yellow railing above a brightly illuminated shaft, they approached stealthily along

the wall. Crawling on their stomachs the last five yards they peeked over the rim and looked down.

The opening stretched at least fifty yards across and was just as deep, well lit with powerful floodlights rigged up around the rim. Five men worked on machinery, burning torches releasing bright blue sparks that left the impressions of x-rayed equipment on the shaft's walls. Off to the right two small tunnels opened up, people walking back and forth. On the far side a yellow lift enclosure ran up the wall to this level, large cranes next to it, their cables extending down to the shaft's floor.

'Vot are they doing?' Thomas whispered.

'Good ... question. They're making frames for something.'

'Correct,' came a voice.

A pistol cocked behind them. Slowly, they both looked over their shoulders.

'This is not the games room ... is it?' Johnno asked.

6

The journey back up, via the lift, was both quicker and easier than the steps. Wolf and Od stood covered in sweat, pistols levelled at their visitors, saying nothing as Johnno absently whistled the tune 'Girl from Ipanema', the rickety old lift clanking loudly as it laboured slowly upwards.

The lift doors opened to six men, not looking happy at having their sleep disturbed. They marched the visitors the short distance to a storeroom and locked them in, having first frisked Johnno and removed the first aid packs. And his lighters.

Shue surveyed the state of Thomas's bathroom; the hole, the stained mirror, the dead pigeon and the wall. 'Hold them in the storeroom till morning, the cold will open their mouths.'

He stepped out. 'I am off to bed, do not disturb me,' he growled.

Johnno moved boxes, making seats for them both. They sat in silence for five minutes, then Thomas – irritated at the breeze - found paper and a roll of selotape and so taped up the window and door.

'Good lad,' Johnno offered, still feeling the effects of the alcohol, his head heavy and his eyes closing.

Thomas found several large plastic bags and punched holes in them, making improvised overcoats. He put one on himself, another over Johnno.

His knife again went undetected, but the door's hinges were not visible. Ten minutes of earnest tapping of the walls revealed only solid stone, his mentor and guardian already snoring happily. Thomas sighed, placed on a second plastic bag, made a hat from an old box-file and tried to get some sleep. They had taken his Gameboy, so he could not get a message out asking for a rescue.

Helen reclined the seat, folding her arms and closing her eyes, Claus sat watching the screens with their volumes turned off.

Check-out before twelve noon!

1

Dolf woke Shue as early as he dared, 8am. After five minutes of barking, coughing, spitting, cursing no one in particular and then everyone in general, Shue was awake and dressed.

‘What news?’ he barked.

‘All the borders to Austria have been sealed, sir. But not by the Austria authorities, sir, by every other country we border.’

‘I know this!’ Shue spat out.

‘They also have soldiers on the borders, sir.’

Shue stopped dead, thinking hard. ‘Soldiers?’ he muttered. ‘Any intruders near the mountain?’

‘None, sir. The gatehouse reports all quiet, same in the town. But there is one problem.’

‘What?’

Dolf hesitated. ‘The painting we sent to Turin never arrived. There has been no contact.’

Shue spun around. ‘Marco would not dare steal from me!’ Shue roared, but seemed not one hundred percent sure of that idea. ‘Who went with him?’

‘Steffan and Willie.’

‘They are good men, they would not betray me,’ he insisted. ‘They must have been stopped by those damn roadblocks. This idiot and his treasure has brought this upon us.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Bring them to the hall.’

Dolf stepped out.

Thomas eased into a seat, looking tired and pale, as Johnno was roughly thrown into a chair. Six men stood with pistols as Dolf entered with Shue. Shue eased himself down, calmly

pouring himself a coffee and sipping it for several seconds as he observed Johnno.

‘Sleep well?’ Johnno sarcastically enquired.

‘Your treasure theft has closed the borders. Now some of my men have been stopped and captured.’

‘Told you I had the treasure,’ Johnno croaked. ‘Interpol’s looking for it.’ He coughed.

Shue studied Johnno carefully, considering if he should reveal the detail of the soldiers on the border. ‘What were you doing in the caves?’

‘Looking for a way out.’

‘Why? I thought you were in no hurry?’ Shue tested.

Johnno forced a menacing smile. ‘That was before I noticed a Vatican spy working here.’

Shue jumped up, the guards stepping back and stiffening, glancing at each other. Breathing heavily and rasping, resting his weight on his knuckles, Shue demanded, ‘What do you know of Vatican spies?’

‘K2 found - and killed – many of them a few weeks back. When we searched the home of one I found a file on you, that’s why I came here to sell you the treasure – I knew you were dealing in stolen Nazi artworks, it was in the file.’

Shue and Dolf made eye contact, both clearly concerned. ‘What does the Vatican know about me?’

‘Everything,’ Johnno carefully mouthed. ‘Now, how about a nice warm coffee for your guest?’

Shue waved a fat hand at a guard, the man pouring coffee for Johnno and Thomas. Johnno offered Thomas a disapproving look for sipping the coffee, but did not shout as the lad glanced timidly up.

Finishing the coffee quickly Johnno eased back. ‘So, what you going to pay me for revealing this spy?’

‘I might let you live,’ Shue offered. ‘You, and the boy.’

Johnno stood and stretched, the nearest guard stepping back.

‘Who is the spy?’ Shue demanded, slamming a fat paw of a hand onto the wooden table.

Johnno looked the first man up and down, stepping slowly to the next. He smiled at Wolf, who seemed to object strongly to that friendly gesture, before facing Dolf. ‘It’s not Dolf,’ he whispered, Shue glancing at his right hand man.

Johnno stopped at the next man. ‘What’s your name?’

The guard glanced at Shue before answering. ‘Rolf.’

‘Rolf, Dolf and Wolf,’ Johnno listed with an amused grin. He stepped closer to Od. ‘And what’s your name?’

‘I told you my name, idiot.’

‘I know, I just like to annoy you.’ He stepped past, his left hand grabbing Od’s pistol a second later, right hand punching to the chin. Od fell back and hit the wall, Johnno turning the pistol and shooting him in the lower stomach a second later.

The guards ran around, weapons trained on Johnno, but mindful of what may have just happened and the hint of a spy in their midst.

Shue stepped closer. ‘*He* ... was the spy? I don’t believe it!’

Od’s Latin prayers got everyone’s attention.

Johnno handed the pistol to Shue, brushing past and helping himself to another coffee. ‘Any chance of some breakfast, lard arse?’

Shue emptied the magazine into Od, roaring with anger. He threw the empty pistol at Od’s lifeless body and stormed out, leaving Johnno sat with a coffee and Thomas sat staring wide-eyed at Od’s body.

‘So, was that a *yes* to breakfast?’ Johnno loudly called after Shue.

An hour later breakfast was brought in, Thomas and Johnno tucking in ravenously, fortunately without Od’s body in attendance.

Thirty minutes later Johnno felt better, lighting up, sat now in Shue's chair. He checked his watch: 9.45am. Thomas copied the movement.

Wolf commented, 'You two check your watches often.'

'Lot going on today, don't want to miss anything,' Johnno said with a smile.

'What is ... *going on* today?'

'We might go for a drive in the country and fetch my treasure. Or we may sit here and play chicken.'

'Play ... chicken?'

'This game would be no fun if I just told you the answers, now would it?'

'Idiot!' Wolf cursed, stepping to a window and peering out.

Shue reappeared with Dolf, looking a little calmer. Od's body had been removed earlier, the blood cleaned away by the old woman, who seemed just as disinterested at everything going on. Shue walked around to his chair, waiting for Johnno to vacate it. He sat as Johnno returned to Thomas, fresh coffee being brought in. Shue said nothing for a full minute. Finally, he calmly said, 'Tell me of the Vatican interest in K2.'

Johnno took a drag. 'They were looking for something, something buried in the caves at Schloss Diane.'

'And what ... *caves* ... are these?'

'Dunno really. There's the start of several caves, all collapsed. Only one to be opened up had Gunter's *reserve gold*, as you put it. And that took months. Seems like someone collapsed the caves years ago.'

Shue stared back, nodding. 'And what did the captured men reveal after *the chair*?'

'None talked, they all sat happily chanting stuff in Latin apparently,' Johnno lied. 'All K2 got was that file on you. Seems the Nazis sacked some churches in France and the like during the war, Vatican figured you and Gunter might have it. Guess they want it back.'

‘Any ... *particular* items they wanted?’

‘The spearhead for one,’ Johnno lied. ‘Anyway, I thought the real spearhead was here, in Vienna?’

Shue shrugged. ‘They cannot determine its validity,’ he calmly replied.

‘Will we go for the gold today?’ Thomas asked, trying to help Johnno.

‘No,’ Johnno replied. ‘Police all over the countryside.’

‘It may still be possible to recover it,’ Shue suggested, a growing warmth in his tone. ‘Or part of it. Is it ... all in one place?’

‘The gold is, the Panels are in Germany,’ Johnno lied. ‘Anyway, Vatican now knows I’m here, Od would have told them last night.’

‘There are no mobile phones here,’ Shue assured Johnno. ‘No radios ... and no way of contacting anyone other than the regular phone, which is monitored.’

‘He must have had some way of contacting them?’ Johnno idly commented.

‘Perhaps when he went into the town, which he did not do yesterday,’ Shue softly illustrated. ‘Our people in the local towns and villages would contact us if there were strangers or police.’

Johnno took a drag. ‘That’s good. So, if you don’t mind me asking, what you doing in the caves below?’

Shue lost his composure for just a second before recovering. ‘Nazi treasure, hidden here during the war. Gold, coins, jewels. I’ve been searching the caves for thirty years. And, before you came here, I was hoping that the spearhead and the Amber Panels may be hidden here.’

‘Did Gunter know?’ Johnno risked.

‘Yes, we were friends a long time.’

‘Why did you fall out?’

‘Who said we ... *fell out*?’ Shue teased.

‘It was in your Vatican file. Ten years ago, wasn’t it?’

‘This file would be interesting reading,’ Shue suggested.

‘So, why did you fall out?’ Johnno pressed.

‘I continue to believe the treasure is here, he believed it was ... elsewhere. So I spend my money here, he spent his doing other things.’

‘Seems fair enough. People fall out for less. So, how long would it take you to off-load my gold?’

‘Gold? Perhaps a week. It would be melted, of course.’

‘And the panels?’ Johnno asked.

‘Finding a buyer who will take the risk is the problem.’

‘Like I said, I’m in no hurry. You have the one piece, so you can use that to get people interested whilst I’m in the Bahamas.’

‘I thought it was Panama?’ Shue tested.

‘Planning on travelling and enjoying life. Me and the kid.’

Shue studied Thomas from under his eyebrows for several seconds. Facing Johnno again Shue said, ‘If you are prepared to trust us we could go for some of the gold today. I can assure you that my people can move it without getting caught.’

‘OK, after lunch.’

‘What’s for lunch?’ Thomas asked.

Johnno thumbed at Thomas. ‘Give him his game back, keep him quiet, eh?’

Shue nodded to Wolf, who retrieved it. Thomas turned it on and started a fresh game, closely observed by Wolf for many seconds.

Johnno checked his watch. 10am. ‘I’m going to sleep for an hour, your storeroom was uncomfortable.’

‘Of course. And apologies for your treatment. We were... naturally concerned.’

Johnno stood, a false smile firmly in place. ‘Of course.’ He roughly dragged up Thomas. ‘C’mon.’

Wolf escorted them back and followed them into Johnno’s room. ‘Tell me, why the holes?’

Johnno lifted his gaze to the hole in the ceiling. ‘When we tried to escape I was drunk. Kept putting my foot through.’

Thomas roared with laughter.

Wolf shook his head. ‘You are a very poor secret agent!’

The door slammed as Johnno lay on the bed. ‘Gimme the game?’ Thomas crawled over the large bed and lay next to him. ‘Set your watch for 11am.’ Johnno selected ‘Kong has a huge donger’ and started it. ‘Spending the night in the storeroom was cold for us, after being *captured* in the caves. Wonder what was going on down there? They had the small caves exiting to the river all sealed up with metal grills, two inches of thick metal. And that shaft down with all the work going on. Looks like they were searching for something, don’t suppose they *go out* much, or want to.

‘Finding a *traitor* amongst his guards was a shock for Mister Shue, especially seeing as *who* sent him. Still, he’s calm enough now, no contact *out* from the traitor. We’ll sleep till 11am, then lunch ready for 11.30, desert at noon I reckon. All seems nice enough. Strange though, Shue not knowing much about K2. And he sounds a bit ... *short of cash*.’

‘Let’s get some sleep before lunch,’ Thomas said directly at the Gameboy.

Johnno ended the game, Kong giving a single finger gesture as the burst transmission transmitted. Finally, a ‘thumbs up’ from Kong and a little dance.

* * *

Helen’s office buzzed with warm bodies, the screens being closely observed.

‘Ma’am!’ burst from the phone, rather less controlled than normal. ‘Message from Johnno, lengthy message being transcribed now.’

Everyone’s attention turned to Helen; the Ministers, the mangers, even the Delta Force Colonel. A minute later a

manager brought in several sheets and handed them to Otto, Claus and Helen, the detail rapidly read and digested.

‘Everything is on target and progressing,’ Helen formally stated. She tapped the phone. ‘Confirm to all stations - time line has been confirmed. I repeat, time line has been confirmed.’ She pointed at the Colonel, the man stepping out.

‘Interesting,’ Otto stated to no one in particular.

‘What is?’ Minister Lepper enquired.

Otto explained, ‘Herr Shue is short of money, so financial gain may be an issue.’

‘He is supposed to be very rich,’ Lepper countered.

‘Apparently not,’ Otto pressed. ‘Perhaps he has used his money to repair the bombs. Also, sending the painting to Turin was a quick sale for cash. A desperate act!’

‘Then he will sell the bombs!’ Lepper stated.

‘He will do no such thing,’ Helen insisted. ‘He has two hours left to live.’

She faced Otto, a signal towards the door. They stepped out. ‘The lack of knowledge of K2,’ she whispered, ‘and the traitor, confirms the real problem here. Shue hasn’t been interested in us – at all!’

Otto clasped his hands behind his back, straightened and sighed. ‘And a difficult group to deal with. We dare not attack, or even threaten them.’

When Otto’s phone chirped he stepped away and answered. ‘When? OK.’ He returned, an enigmatic wink for Helen as they stepped back in.

2

Thomas punched John on the arm. ‘Stop snoring - it is time!’

Johno yawned, let his legs drop off the bed and lit up. ‘Fuck.’

‘C’mon. 11am, time for ... food.’

Johno stood, scratching the side of his head. 'Need a pee. I'll use my bathroom, yours is a mess.'

Five minutes later they returned to the hall under escort, Shue not expecting them.

'What's the time on your watch, Mister Shue?'

Shue did not understand, asking Wolf what the time was.

'It is 11.06,' Wolf stated, a hard stare for Johno.

'Be a love and bring all you guards in here, Mister Shue, I have something to say.'

Shue slowly eased up his bulk. 'You have something ... to say?'

'Yeah.' Johno grabbed a coffee. Without looking up he added, 'And it's very important. More important than revealing your traitor.'

Thinking it another traitor, Shue sent for his men, observing Johno sipping his coffee.

When the guards were assembled Johno said, 'Contact your gatehouse, see if anyone's still alive down there.' The guards stiffened.

'Still alive?' Shue repeated.

Wolf stepped out, leaving everyone fixed on Johno. He burst back in a minute later. 'The phone was answered by a stranger, a K2 agent.' The guards glanced at each other.

'What is going on?' Shue loudly demanded.

Johno offered him a cold stare. 'Your gatehouse has been taken. There're now two hundred K2 agents surrounding this mountain, and *all* cave exits. All borders to Austria have been sealed, the Armies of Switzerland, Germany, the Czech Republic and others have been mobilised. You guys should watch the tele' more often.'

Shue waved a hand at Wolf, who ran back out, the guards, as well as Shue, now looking stunned. Johno waited, the deathly silence punctuated by Thomas playing on his Gameboy, head down and seemingly oblivious to what was going on.

Wolf reappeared. 'All over the news, thousands of soldiers all over Europe, tanks on the borders.'

'Tanks!' Shue gasped, Johno checking his watch. Shue faced him. 'Who are you working for? What is happening?'

'I'm the boss of K2,' Johno stated with cold menace. 'I took over when my father, Sir Morris Beesely, had a heart attack a few days ago. As to what's going on, that comes in two parts. First, K2 was taken over by Beesely – and not legally. K2 is now a front for the CIA and MI6. Second, they know about the nuclear bombs.'

The guards started talking amongst themselves as Shue slumped.

'Ten minutes,' Thomas stated.

Shue glanced at the lad, then back to Johno. 'What will they do?' he asked in a whisper.

'That depends entirely upon you,' Johno stated.

'On me?' Shue asked, the guards now very interested in the next words from Johno's mouth.

'Yeah, on you. As far as I see it you have several options. Prison for life, a bullet in the head, or *the chair*.'

'You are not the boss of K2,' Wolf challenged. 'You would not risk yourself here.'

Johno offered him a menacing smile.

'Five minutes,' Thomas loudly stated, everyone focusing on him.

'Can someone be a love and open a window?' Johno asked.

The nearest man peered out the window before opening it, a cold draft now circulating around the room.

'How's the weather today?' Johno asked, his attention held on Shue.

Thomas looked up. 'Some clouds, but OK.'

'You are mad,' Wolf suggested with venom.

'You may be right.' Johno eased forwards, resting his elbows on the table. 'It's been said before.' A distant rumble could be heard. 'But for the moment, this madman says this

to you.’ With power in his voice Johnno loudly stated, ‘Feel me roar!’

‘Helicopters!’ the man at the window shouted. ‘Attack helicopters! American Army!’

As Shue observed, the cup in front of him started to vibrate and move sideways, his men rushing to the window. Shue and Johnno held their stares as the room resonated with the thunderous noise created by two-dozen Apaches passing closely by. Shue broke first, glancing at the window.

‘They will attack?’ Wolf asked Johnno directly.

‘Depends,’ Johnno answered. Then louder, ‘Someone close that bloody window, eh, it’s cold in here.’

The Apaches passed, disappearing over the next mountain, the window now closed.

‘Depends on what?’ Wolf asked, now ignoring Shue’s authority.

‘On whether or not I send them the correct signal.’

Rolf put a gun to Thomas’s head, Thomas continuing with his game. ‘Send the signal.’

‘Not that easy. And they need to see and hear me and the boy across the bridge out front.’ Johnno poured himself another coffee.

‘You will be killed as well!’ Wolf pointed out.

‘Life’s a risk,’ Johnno stated. ‘And I’m a gambler. Put your weapons down, or any chance you have goes out the window.’

Several guards did so straightaway.

‘What are you doing?’ Shue complained.

‘What use are they against those helicopters?’ Rolf barked directly at Shue.

Johnno took in all the faces before tapping the table with his coffee mug. ‘OK, I’m going to ask a question. I *strongly*... suggest you answer it. What were you planning on doing with the nukes?’

‘Tell him!’ Rolf implored, seconded by others. Only Dolf stood firm at Shue’s shoulder, but even he did not seem a hundred percent sure of himself.

‘Maybe you *are* a gambler,’ Shue commented. ‘Get the cave plan.’

Rolf retrieved the map and laid it out on the table in front of Johnno. Under the blue cavern Johnno could see another tunnel, connecting to the large shaft; it had not been illustrated on the metal diagram in the caves.

Shue began, waving a fat paw, ‘We had no intention of using the bombs for any ... *terrorist* action. They were never to leave here.’

Johnno’s brow knitted. ‘Then what?’

‘They are in the lower tunnel, under the lake. It is simple really, maybe desperate, but simple. When they explode they make a large hole, which collapses and drains out the lake. That gives us access to the original cave, across the lake three hundred metres then up to the chambers.’

‘And what’s in the chambers?’ Johnno knowingly asked.

‘The Templar Treasure!’ Rolf shouted.

Johnno stood and walked to the window, breathing hard. He kicked a chair over. ‘Fucking Vatican!’ He turned. ‘That’s what the Vatican didn’t want me to get hold of!’ The men looked confused, Johnno adding, ‘One of the reasons we came here is because we thought *you* were trying to kill *me*. We suspected the Vatican, but we weren’t sure. They didn’t want me to come here because they knew K2 would kill you and explore the caves –’

‘Getting the treasure which they covet so much,’ Shue pointed out with a contented chuckle.

‘It wasn’t K2 who shot up my car on the way here,’ Johnno added. ‘And there were two determined attempts to stop me.’

Thomas stood. ‘You should probably stop the air strikes.’

‘Air strikes!’ several people repeated.

Johno sighed and stepped back to the table. 'The American Air Force in Germany is getting ready to bomb.'

'We'll split the treasure with you,' Rolf suggested, angering Shue.

Johno stepped again to the window.

'Ten minutes,' Thomas informed him.

Johno stared down at the beautiful view, the river in the distance. He stared for ten seconds before turning. 'I don't make deals. I'll tell you what'll happen, you do as I say. If not you get the chair.' He waited, the men glancing at each other.

'What is the alternative?' Wolf asked, fear in his voice.

'Simple. You all join K2, full wages, protection, plus a small share of the treasure. That's my only offer.'

Rolf put his pistol in his belt and stood next to Johno, two men copying immediately. Wolf reluctantly copied with a loud sigh, followed by three more men. Dolf remained next to Shue.

'What do you say, Dolf?' Johno asked.

'Five minutes,' Thomas pleaded.

Dolf nodded, Shue looking up at his trusted aid.

'There's only one person who can't join K2,' Johno stated. Shue slowly stood, his weight rested on his knuckles. Johno added, 'If he's still alive when my people get here the deal is off.'

Rolf raised his pistol.

'No,' Johno called. 'The people watching must think he's dead. Out the window.'

Thomas blinked. Then the roar of jets shook the room, everyone looking up or at the window.

'Your running out of time, gentlemen,' Johno shouted. 'That's the US Air Force.'

Dolf grabbed Shue and pushed him forwards, his former boss grabbed by other guards as he screamed. They manhandled Shue's bulk to the window, taking six men to push him through.

‘Stay here,’ Johno ordered. ‘Thomas, stand by the door. Any K2 men come in, stop them shooting anyone.’ He rushed out, turned left in the corridor and to the room he found at the end, bursting in as Grey came through the window. ‘Having fun?’

‘Christ!’ Grey gasped before easing in.

Johno shoved him out the way then stuck his upper body out the window, a ‘thumbs up’ then wave forwards. Turning back he shouted, ‘Give me your phone. Quick.’

Grey handed it over. ‘This is Johno. Castle taken, Shue dead, gun battle in progress, cleaning up. Call off air strikes, nukes secured below. Squadrons at the caves standby, we’ll open the caves - do not enter. ‘A’ squadron forwards now.’ He hung up.

‘What gun battle?’ Grey asked. ‘It’s all quiet as fuck.’

‘On me.’

They ran back along the corridor and into hall, Grey levelling his weapon at the men stood behind Thomas.

‘It’s cool, they’re now K2,’ Johno insisted.

‘They are?’ Grey queried.

‘Shoot out the windows and start a fire!’ Johno shouted to Shue’s men. ‘Got to make it look like a fight in progress or they won’t believe us.’

Guards shot out the windows, others throwing papers onto the fire and then dropping them below the window. Two K2 climbers burst in, attracted by the gunfire.

Johno grabbed them. ‘Ask no questions. Go upstairs, shoot out some windows then report in to Helen that Shue’s men have been killed.’

With odd looks they ran out.

‘What the hell’s going on?’ Grey demanded.

Johno dragged Grey to the table and the cave map. With a finger he illustrated the layout. ‘Nukes are here, hoping to blow out the floor of this underground lake, giving access to this cave, then up to that chamber. That’s what they were intended for.’

‘Why? What’s in the chamber?’

‘Templar treasure.’

Grey’s eyebrows shot up. ‘Shit. Is that why –’

‘Yes. They want it. Bad.’

‘Christ!’

‘Exactly. And *he*’s on their side.’

‘So what are you gunna to do?’

‘Set ‘em off, of course.’

‘You’ll what?’ Grey gasped, grabbing Johnno’s arm and spinning his around.

‘They’re deep underground, no effect outside,’ Johnno forcefully stated. With a hard stare he told Grey, ‘That treasure will end up in K2, therefore available for Lodge activities. You *will* assist, that’s an order.’

Grey stared back for a few seconds before finally breathing out. ‘Yes. Sir.’

‘What we tell the world after is up to us. For now we need the world to think we dealt with this.’

Gunfire could be heard, the smoke in the room now causing everyone to head for the door. The old lady walked in, collected the dirty cups and left without raising her head.

3

Helen stood with the others, watching images of the castle.

‘There!’ someone shouted. A window opened and a man fell out.

‘Someone went out a window!’ Lepper gasped.

‘That was Shue!’ Claus informed them.

‘Someone threw Shue out the window?’ Otto queried.

‘I wonder who?’ Helen pondered.

‘Forces entering the drawbridge,’ burst from the phone.

The desk phone came to life a few seconds later. ‘This is Johnno.’ Everyone turned. ‘Castle taken, Shue dead, gun battle in progress, cleaning up. Call off air strikes, nukes

secured below. Squadrons at the caves standby, we'll open the caves, do not enter. 'A' Squadron forwards now.'

A collective sigh went up, men started shaking hands.

Otto faced Minister Lepper. 'I believe, Minister, you still have a job.'

The command centre staff all stopped and stood facing the main entrance as someone entered.

Wilhem passed Otto. 'I have some soldiers to return to barracks.'

'I also have this task,' Novak stated, stepping towards the door. Their exit became blocked and they backed up.

'Didn't miss anything, did I?' Beesely asked, manoeuvring his electric wheelchair into his old office.

'Welcome back,' Otto offered. 'Johno has just thrown Herr Shue out of a rather high window.'

'Oh dear.'

Helen stepped quickly around the desk, knelt and hugged him.

'Well, at least someone missed me,' Beesely joked.

'Hello again,' Novak flatly stated. 'Good to see you are well. And mobile.' He stepped out.

Blaum approached Beesely as Helen stood. They shook. 'Good to see you are well. But I hate to say your staff have performed superbly in your absence.'

'I should hope so,' Beesely said as Blaum filed past.

Minister Lepper shook Beesely's hand. 'I have heard much, Sir Morris.'

'When this is all over, let's have dinner. You'll be invited, not abducted.'

Lepper smiled and left the office, the Ministers for Slovenia and Hungary repeating Lepper's movements. Beesely manoeuvred to the screen, observing the castle with the managers, all now beaming smiles and squeezing his hand or arm.

Otto got called out. Returning he asked the Colonel to step out, only K2 managers remaining. He knocked off the

video conferencing screen connecting to Stanton. Then, as an after thought, faced it away, just in case, Beesely puzzling the odd move. Otto explained, 'Mr. Stanton has been observing for twenty-four hours.'

'Must have been tiring for him.'

'Johno wishes a private talk,' Otto explained. 'Very private.'

Helen moved her chair, making room for Beesely to squeeze behind his old desk.

'Helen, that's your desk now. I'm retired. Finally.' He waited.

She finally sat and tapped the phone. 'Put Johno through.'

'Who's that?' Johno asked.

'This is Helen, managers here ... plus a special *retired* visitor.'

'Yeah, who's that?'

'Me, layabout.'

'Old fucker! You're back, eh? Call you 'Ironside' now.'

'Iron side?' Otto puzzled.

Beesely explained, '1980s TV show, great detective in a wheelchair.'

'He was a defence lawyer!' Johno corrected.

'Was he?' Beesely queried.

'Yeah, listen up. Shue dead, castle secure, and we're keeping it.'

'We are?' Helen queried.

'Yeah, why not? Great location. Tell the world that ... there's lots of ordnance here, mustard gas or some bollocks, take weeks to check the caves and then clean up. In the meantime, find a way to own it.'

'What about the bombs?' Helen pressed.

'Going to set them off in a while.'

'You're what?' Helen shrieked, everyone focusing on the phone.

‘Tell those Ministers that it’s on a countdown, deep underground, no danger.’

‘Johno?’ Beesely called. ‘What are you up to?’

‘Those attacks on me were Vatican, not Shue. He didn’t have a clue, spent his last dollar on getting the bombs ready. They’re in a tunnel underneath an underground lake. When they go pop the lake collapses and gives us access to a flooded cave, which then gives us access to a chamber high up inside the mountain.’

‘Why?’ Helen asked. ‘What’s in the chamber?’

‘What would you like there to be in the chamber? And what would cause the Vatican to go to great lengths to stop me getting here and into that chamber?’ Everyone in the office puzzled it. ‘The *entire* Templar’s treasure!’ Johno informed them.

Gasps shot around the room.

‘Bloody hell,’ Beesely let out. ‘No wonder they tried to stop him.’ Otto struggled to control his reaction.

‘Johno?’ Helen called. ‘Is there another way ... to reach the treasure?’ Otto focused on her.

‘Yeah, tunnel through a mile of Europe’s hardest rock for a year or two without anyone noticing.’

She faced Beesely, who now shrugged.

‘I’m doing it anyway,’ Johno insisted. ‘Least I can do to piss off the Vatican. What do you reckon it would be worth?’

Everyone gave it some thought.

Beesely finally said, ‘Got to be couple a hundred thousand gold coins.’

‘Then over a hundred million pounds,’ Otto absently suggested, staring out of focus. ‘Perhaps much more.’

‘We’ll soon see,’ Johno shouted. ‘I’ll let you know. Off into a cave with Thomas, so call out the marines!’ He hung up.

‘Oh gawd,’ Beesely let out.

‘Ma’am?’ came from the phone.

‘Yes?’

‘There are representatives from the Vatican on their way, they will be here in two hours.’

She faced Beesely.

‘I think we got someone’s attention,’ Beesely stated.

In the command centre Otto approached Claus. Whispering he said, ‘The Templar’s Treasure is hidden in Shue’s cave.’

Claus was shocked upright. ‘My God! Half the ministers of Europe are here!’

Otto tipped his eyebrows. ‘And we are about to ... re-discover the files and the list with a live video feed.’

‘Still,’ Claus offered. ‘It is our people getting in there first.’

‘*With* ... some American soldiers and Shue’s men,’ Otto cautioned. And *none* of our men over there know about the list, or what to do.’

‘You should probably warn Minister Blaum,’ Claus said with a pained expression.

Otto took a big breath and let it out slowly. ‘He ... will not be happy.’

‘We could not have known what was there,’ Claus softly insisted, Otto nodding his agreement.

4

‘A’ Squadron’s Commander and two troopers stepped into Shue’s dining area.

Johnno grabbed the commander’s radio. ‘This is Johnno to all mobiles, listen up! Herr Shue is dead, his staff have surrendered and are now working with us. I repeat, the staff have surrendered and are working for K2. Don’t ... shoot ... anyone!’ He handed back the radio.

‘Good result,’ a trooper commented.

Johnno faced Grey. ‘Let’s get *you* to the caves. Rolf, Dolf and Wolf, with me.’

‘Rolf, Dolf and Wolf?’ Grey quietly repeated.

‘Thomas!’ Johnno called, the group setting off.

The cobbled road was now brightly lit, the drawbridge doors open and dozens of heavily armed K2 guards swarming around. Johnno’s group piled into the lift, nine of them, the rickety old lift slowly descending with a loud clatter. A hundred yard walk and they were to the shaft, workers surprised to see them but reassured by Dolf.

The group took the small yellow lift down to the shaft floor in snugly fitting groups of four, taking the tunnel on the right then a further hundred yards along to the bombs. Throughout the small tunnel they noted numerous wires hanging from the ceiling; explosives to collapse the tunnel.

Grey started examining the bombs. ‘They look ready.’ He grabbed a perplexed looking Indian technician stood near by. ‘Timing mechanism set-up?’

‘We are waiting parts for the second bomb,’ the man nervously explained in an accented voice, eyeing the heavily armed K2 guards.

‘Don’t bother,’ Grey suggested. ‘In close proximity the first bomb will overload the second, setting it off.’

‘Ah, this we theorised, but we were not sure,’ the technician offered. ‘And who are you, sir?’

‘American Army - your boss is dead.’

The technician dropped his clipboard and raised his hands in surrender.

‘Are you ready with the first bomb?’ Grey asked, examining the trigger mechanism as Johnno and Thomas observed.

‘Yes, we believe so. It has been ready for most six months. We have checked and re-checked the symmetry.’

‘What’s the countdown?’ Johnno asked, lowering the man’s hands.

‘From thirty minutes to twenty-four hours, sir.’

‘Set it for thirty minutes and activate,’ Johnno ordered.

The man blinked. ‘Sir?’

‘You heard!’

‘I can do it,’ Grey offered. ‘Are you ready to collapse the exit?’

‘Yes,’ the technician confirmed. ‘The timers are linked, the access tunnel is blown fifteen minutes before the bombs.’

Grey checked the controls and then activated the countdown. Turning, he quietly said, ‘Fire in the hole.’ They ran. ‘Fire in the hole!’ he repeated as they reached the main shaft, men scrambling up ladders, some in the lift.

Johno lifted his head towards the K2 men at the shaft edge. ‘Evacuate the caves! The bombs are on countdown!’

Everyone ran, a distorted and echoing chorus of shouts wafting around the shaft. Johno and Thomas were the last to reach the larger access tunnel, jogging along with the technician.

‘That everyone?’ Johno asked. It was.

A short jog along the larger tunnel and they waited five minutes for the lift to clatter back down, Grey remaining with them. On the way up Johno whistled ‘The Girl from Ipanema’ again, Thomas trying to copy.

Grey faced the technician. ‘You think the lake will go?’

The technician shrugged. ‘Some good people did studies, *before* ... Herr Shue silenced them. We lost twenty divers trying to cross the lake. It’s cold, black, murky and with strange currents.’

‘Currents?’ Grey repeated.

‘In the middle there is an underground stream. It joins the river outside.’

Grey nodded. ‘How far across?’

‘Down seventy metres, across two hundred and fifty, up seventy.’

‘Tricky profile,’ Grey said, facing Johno. ‘The decompression stop for seventy metres is half an hour at best, in cold water. Going back down seventy metres after looking around the cave would be a big no-no for nitrogen narcosis. No wonder they never came back.’

Johno made eye contact with the technician. ‘What about the underwater ROV?’

‘It showed the far cave and a spiral staircase upwards. No one has stepped up those stairs for five hundred years. Above fifty metres it is dry. Four months of trying finally got the ROV up. We rigged a small balloon so it rose up, a single camera image – carved stone stairs, some writing on the walls.’

Johno and Thomas made eye contact, raising their eyebrows. Addressing the technician Johno said, ‘And five hundred years ago ... it was all dry?’

The man nodded. ‘Ancient legend suggests that the stream was dammed to flood the cavern.’

‘Keep the treasure inside,’ Grey noted.

‘Herr Shue was not so much interested in the gold coins,’ the technician explained as the lift shakily ascended. ‘Some believe that the coffin and bones of Jesus and Mary are in there. Shue wanted to find them, prove it and let the world know, to discredit the Vatican.’

Johno’s eyes widened. ‘Shit,’ he let out, facing Grey. ‘No wonder the Vatican got pissy. That would fuck up their dogma!’

Grey became concerned. ‘Johno, I don’t believe any skeletons are in there, certainly not who Shue thinks. But if there are ... *certain items* in there, then there’re some powerful individuals, bodies and governments, who’ll want them kept from seeing the light of day. Including your new associates.’

‘We’ll face that problem when we come to it. If the big boss wants them he can have them.’ Johno faced the technician. ‘How come no one tunnelled in, you’ve had thirty years?’

‘Very hard rock, not to mention numerous layers of very soft rock. And many underwater streams. Shue made ten attempts, a lot of time and money, many men drowned.’ He shrugged. The see-through lift doors, a wire mesh, were

opened by K2 men and they stepped out onto the cobblestones.

Johno checked his watch. 'Move away from the lift shaft,' he bellowed, his words echoing along the internal cobblestone road. He grabbed a radio. 'This is Johno. There'll be one explosion in a minute's time, another in fifteen minutes when the nukes go off. Open all doors and windows and make ready. Clear the cave exits.'

The cobblestone road was evacuated, most men heading up to the next level. Back in the hall the smoke had dissipated, the windows now open, most of Shue's former guards sat around the long table.

'We got the panel and your gold, sir,' a K2 man informed him.

'Have some cars brought up, set a base – we're keeping this place.'

A faint rumble could be felt through their feet.

'That's the tunnel going down,' Grey loudly explained as he checked his watch.

'Enough to contain the nukes?' Johno asked with a grin.

'Hell, yes,' Grey responded. 'Almost fifty metres of rock. That big pit was filled in as well, explosives up the walls above the nuke access tunnels, I saw them.'

'Let's hope they did their homework,' Johno said, an encouraging smile at Thomas as he grabbed a coffee.

A K2 guard stepped in. 'Your phone and gun, sir.'

Johno checked the weapon before putting it in a pocket. He pressed green on the phone. 'This is Johno. According to the nuke technician the bombs go off in fifteen minutes. Standby.'

'What did I do?' the Indian technician complained with a big shoulder shrug.

'You engineered a nuclear trigger,' Johno pointed out, a steely stare at the man. Then he suddenly brightened, 'But not to worry, we'll find a use for you. Pop to the canteen and get yourself some food.' The technician left. Johno

made eye contact with a K2 guard, a nod to the door and a throat-cutting sign. The guard stepped out, Shue's guards immediately concerned.

Grey closed in on Johno. 'No witnesses?'

'The engineers will never say what they saw,' Johno firmly stated.

'And them?' Grey asked, a nod towards Shue's guards.

Johno faced the men, since now they were attentively listening. 'They join K2 and we make use of them. If they talk, they get *the chair*. Those engineers helped repair nukes, so they disappear.'

'Five minutes,' Thomas called, hardly having taken his eyes of his watch since entering the room.

'Electro magnetic pulse?' Johno asked, straightening.

'Unlikely,' Grey suggested. 'The rocks will absorb most of it. EMPs like free space.'

'Two minutes,' Thomas informed them at the correct time. He counted down from sixty. At thirty-five a rumble began and continued for fifteen seconds.

'How long till it's safe to go near it?' Johno asked Grey.

'We can use the Geiger counters now. When the nuke went it created a super-heated void, pushed out and crushed the rock into glass, which insulated the radiation – reflecting back in on itself like a mirror, melting the rock into more glass. Then it collapsed back in on itself, getting crushed from above. The radiation is all in the glass, the rocks good insulators and really crap at holding onto radiation. The metals and ores in the rocks can hold radiation, rest of it won't. Only danger would be water going through it, but the powered glass will plug up any holes for decades.'

'Here endeth the lesson,' Johno said with a grin. 'Let's go take a peek. Dolf, Wolf – with me.'

Dolf approached. 'We will need ropes and ladders, ice axes and helmets. It will not be easy.'

Johno waved two K2 guards forwards. 'Go with them, fetch the equipment, meet us down the lift.' The men ran

out. He lifted his phone. ‘This is Johnno. Nukes safely detonated underground, just a slight rumble. Operation Double Bluff is closed. Johnno out.’

* * *

The Ministers congratulated each other as well as Beesely and Helen, champagne being offered.

Helen caught the attention of Minister Lepper. ‘K2 will be holding the castle for some time, there are – apparently – some old Mustard Gas shells from the First World War and a lot of ordnance in the caves, which are extensive. It will take weeks to clean up quietly.’

‘Take your time, Dame Helen,’ Lepper responded. ‘I believe that, in this case, *thoroughness* is more important than *timeliness*.’

They exchanged formal smiles, as if diplomats.

Templar treasure

1

The descent in the lift was ‘interesting’, as Johno put it; interesting in what they may find at the bottom. The doors clanked open and they stepped out, a fine mist hanging in the air, swirls wafting from the explosion on the left towards fresh air off to the right, the fixed lights no longer working.

With torches on they turned right, Johno leading the way at a brisk pace and retracing their steps from the night before. At the end of the tunnel they found the shaft going down, bits of old scuba gear scattered around and a metal rail enclosing the shaft for safety; lest anyone fall down its seventy metre drop.

‘Technical diving gear,’ Grey noted. ‘Twenty of the fuckers still in there!’

‘Be a pleasant trek then,’ Johno muttered. He tried the small winch platform, the electricity still working. At best it could hold three.

‘It smells bad!’ Thomas complained, shinning his torch down.

‘The tunnels will be covered in slime,’ Grey suggested, peering down. ‘Be hard work.’

Hurried footsteps signalled the approach of the equipment. Dolf stepped off to the right and into a smaller tunnel, an old generator rumbling furiously a second later, two floodlights increasing in illumination till they reached full power and lighting the cavern brightly. Plastic yellow boxes were lifted open in sequence by Shue’s men, revealing their well-prepared contents.

‘He did plan ahead,’ Grey noted, admiration in his voice.

‘Had thirty years to do so,’ Johno offered, examining the carefully stacked and labelled contents.

Thomas grabbed a helmet, threw a reel of rope over his head and selected an ice axe. Finding light sticks he broke a

bunch and dropped them over the side. Johnno and Grey joined him peering down, the light sticks mostly immersed in mud and water.

‘Two inches of crap down there,’ Grey suggested, turning to grab equipment.

Four K2 climbers jogged into the light, already kitted out.

Johnno pointed at them. ‘Two of you, down that shaft.’ They were hoisted down. ‘What’s it like?’ Johnno shouted down a minute later.

‘Ten centimetres of water, slippery, but tunnel is clear,’ came back up, badly distorted in echo.

‘Go down fifty metres and back.’ The men disappeared, their torch flashes dying quickly. Johnno faced Wolf. ‘What can we expect?’

‘Eighty metre tunnel, not so tall. Then a large cavern with central a causeway across – but it’s five hundred years old under the water. After this, the other tunnel for ten metres, then stairway up seventy metres to the treasure cavern.’

‘And this ... stairway –’ Johnno began.

‘Is also five hundred years old,’ Wolf cautioned. ‘But we have seen it on the underwater camera, it looks OK. We will need the ladders for the causeway.’ He pointed.

K2 men grabbed four lightweight, three-metre aluminium ladders. Holding all four, one man went down in the hoist.

‘Geiger counter is clear, sir,’ a K2 man offered. He wandered off into dark corner, swinging the detector.

One of the K2 climbers shouted up the shaft that it was OK to proceed, his words badly distorted. Grey and Wolf went down next, followed by Johnno and Thomas, more K2 climbers arriving. As they neared the base of the shaft they started to get splashed with water drops falling from the previously flooded shaft, the sounds of the splashing water growing rapidly.

Stepping off the hoist they squished an inch of brown stringy algae.

‘Err,’ Thomas let out, immediately slipping and being caught by Johnno. He stuck his ice axe into the wall above his head to steady himself as he went, Johnno copying as he followed. Neither he nor Thomas were dressed as well as the others, but they had grabbed yellow hard-hats.

It was slow progress, walking through up to an inch of water whilst getting soaked from drops off the ceiling, the end of the tunnel reached in fifteen minutes. Grey and Dolf were ten yards ahead, shining their torches around the massive cavern like wartime searchlights, a dull roar coming from somewhere.

‘Thomas, watch out for Lancaster bombers!’ Johnno warned. The lad looked up for a moment, before punching Johnno on the arm with a curse.

Johnno could now see that they were on a narrow man-made causeway, the sides dropping off sharply. Below them rested brown, slime-covered boulders and pebbles some three or four yards lower. The left side of the cavern stretched away fifty yards before meeting an almost vertical wall, the right side further again, the roof of the cavern as high as the shaft they had come down. The high cave ceiling was, fortunately, dry; no drips falling down.

A dense mist drifted away from where a waterfall hit the rocks off to the far left, the stream that obviously fed the underground lake. With the gentle roar in their ears they stepped slowly onwards, nowhere to grip with the ice axes, but they would be useful if anyone fell off the causeway.

‘Rope yourselves together,’ Grey shouted, his words repeated in echo off the cavern roof. He threw a rope backwards, each person making a loop and then placing it over their heads, one arm through.

‘There,’ Johnno said to Thomas. ‘Diver!’

Thomas and the others studied the body for a moment, the man’s twin-set of aluminium tanks clearly visible.

The ladders had been stacked at the start of the causeway, but now Grey ordered them brought up. It took ten minutes to ease them forwards, all now placed across a break in the causeway. They advanced slowly; a gentle pull from the man ahead, a tug for the man behind. Thomas slipped, but the rope bounced him straight back up without injury.

In turn they slowly crossed the ladders, the echo of shoes on aluminium rungs filling the cavern. Below the ladders the causeway dropped to a briskly flowing stream running left to right, from the waterfall to a large pool of water on the far right.

‘Last man, pass forwards two ladders,’ Grey shouted from ahead somewhere.

Halting in a line, the lightweight ladders were slowly passed forwards as more K2 men appeared at the tunnel, adding to the available illumination and easing the journey.

‘Johno?’ Grey called from ahead. ‘Look to the right.’

Everyone now shone their torches where Grey aimed his, illuminating a barely discernible artificial wall.

‘That’s where they built a wall to dam the stream,’ Grey suggested.

Johno studied it. Reaching it would have been near impossible, the wall surrounded by the pooling water. Something orange floated in the water, part of a diver’s equipment. A tug on the rope and he advanced.

Thirty minutes later and Grey reached an area of shingle that had no slime covering; a small beach surrounding the next tunnel entrance. Taking up the slack he reeled in the next man before releasing himself.

When Johno stepped onto the shingle he took the lead, through a narrow tunnel before starting up a winding set of steps. Now the ice axes came into their own, essential to climb the extremely slippery steps. The only way to progress safely for them was to put their shoulder into the wall on the right, right foot in the deepest part of the step

and pull with the ice axe. Any push back by a foot slipped almost immediately; Shue had done his homework.

Thirty minutes of hard work left a glistening sweat on Johnno's brow, but in this old stairwell he felt no breeze.

'It's dry here!' he shouted down. 'Some writing on the walls.'

'What's it say?' Grey shouted up, his tone sarcastic.

'Like I could fucking read it! Anyway, it's all chiselled off.'

'Removing the clues,' Wolf suggested as he viewed the markings, rubbing a hand across the stone.

The steps widened and now became a square, not a spiral. Johnno quickened his pace. At the top he stopped and threw off his yellow hat, panting hard in the cavern he emerged into.

The cavern seemed natural, not carved, and was five yards in diameter. Directly in front of the steps stood a large plinth, its writings and carvings scratched off. 'Vandals been in,' he commented.

'The Vandals, as you say, sacked Rome a few hundred years before the Templars existed,' Wolf stated, panting also.

They grouped together, catching their breath except for Grey, who walked quickly around the plinth. They could see only one exit and so stepped through, ducking their heads. The next cavern was of a similar size, a carved lion's head defaced and smashed.

'What's that?' Johnno asked no one in particular, shining his torch upward.

'Minerals in the rocks,' Wolf informed him. 'The ancients thought it was 'God's light' leading the way. Also some natural phosphorescence here.'

'Very pretty,' Thomas muttered as he passed under it.

'There!' Grey pointed. 'A diver.'

The dry-suited diver was examined, his body still in good condition in the cold and dry cave. The next cavern

explored was just as large as the previous, but longer. And lined with dozens of grey sarcophaguses – all smashed.

Johnno stepped straight to one; empty, its lid smashed, its inscription carefully and determinedly chiselled off. ‘Someone went to a lot of trouble to hide who was in here.’ The next five he checked were the same.

‘Johnno?’ Grey called, Johnno immediately concerned by the tone.

Stepping across the cavern’s sandy floor Johnno could immediately see a body. Wolf closed in and gasped as he illuminated it with his torch.

‘I guess Shue wasted thirty years, boys and girls,’ Johnno loudly suggested.

At his feet lay a German soldier in uniform, Second World War, rifle at his side, helmet on his head.

‘This fella blew his brains out,’ Grey quietly suggested. ‘Rifle under the chin.’

‘Got stuck in here,’ Johnno suggested. He straightened. ‘Well, I’d like to think that right about now Shue would be having a heart attack – if he had seen this.’

‘How is it possible?’ Wolf gasped.

‘Johnno?’ a K2 climber called.

They all stepped to the man, another body at his feet.

‘Wartime prisoner,’ Grey stated. ‘Jewish by the look.’

‘Spread out,’ Johnno ordered.

They started to search the stone sarcophaguses, finding all the lids smashed and defaced. What remained was as to ‘why’.

At the far end of the cavern Johnno stepped past three more prisoners, their striped prison clothing still visible. In a small side chamber he stopped dead, staring down. ‘Grey, come here, everyone else back to the steps, get ready to leave. That’s an order!’

Grey stepped in and straightened up. ‘Oh, shit,’ he whispered.

‘There’s no treasure here. This lot got cut off and left behind, water rose or something.’

Grey shook his head. ‘No wonder they didn’t want anyone coming here.’

‘And they didn’t need to kill Shue because they had a spy right here. Someone who could have killed them in their sleep if they got too close to this place.’

‘What’ll you do?’

‘Got any C4?’ Johno asked.

‘Enough for the stairs.’

They stared down at the body, the man’s hands clasped across his chest, a message scribbled on the wall in German: ‘Forgive us’.

‘Don’t know about you, but I’m cold and hungry,’ Johno said. ‘Let’s get back to 2007, eh?’

2

Half way across the causeway the top of the stairwell blew, a cloud of dust bursting from the tunnel entrance, bellowing forwards and enlarging till it engulfed them. Thomas shrieked and fell, bouncing back up on the rope again. Safely across, Johno ordered the access tunnel blown, everyone retreating up the hoist two at a time, all now considerably dirtier and wetter than when they arrived.

At the surface two Range Rovers sat waiting on the cobblestone roadway. Johno, Thomas and Grey jumped in, exasperated looks from the driver at the smell and mess added to his vehicle. Johno order a helicopter, Shue’s guards to be driven to Zug, the castle to be searched and secured. In a field near the gatehouse the three of them climbed into a waiting helicopter.

Steffan, the pilot, turned his head. ‘Christ, Johno. Do you do it deliberately? I spent days cleaning this after the last trip!’ They laughed.

‘Patch me through to operations,’ Johno said as the helicopter climbed in the late afternoon sun.

‘Operations here, sir.’

‘Organise the Learjet for tonight, taking Mr. Grey back to Malta.’ Grey turned his head. Johno continued, ‘I also want you to pack a bag for me and Thomas, and secretly pack one for Helen. *Make sure* she don’t know about it.’

‘Yes, sir. Your father is looking well, very mobile.’

‘Good, he can takeover from me. Back in fifteen minutes, Johno out.’

Grey asked, ‘What about the caves under the castle, especially the flooded one?’

Johno eased back, resting his head. Looking out the window he said, ‘Fuck ‘em, they can wait. Whatever’s there ain’t going nowhere.’

‘I’m not sharing a hotel with you lot,’ Grey warned.

Johno turned his head fully. Through his headset he said, ‘Rumour has it you like to sleep on the balcony.’

Thomas looked up at Grey with a questioning frown.

Grey nodded at the boy. ‘I like to sleep outdoors sometimes.’

‘I like five star hotels,’ Johno pointed out. ‘You can pop back to Gozo and sleep on the rocks with the lizards.’

‘Try the new Radisson, Golden Sands beach. It’s an... SAS hotel.’ They laughed.

‘The SAS, they have their own hotels?’ Thomas asked.

‘Yeah,’ Johno offered. ‘You go in youthful and keen, come out all banged up, bitter and twisted ... with no shampoos or robes.’

No olive branch, just an olive grove

1

‘Cardinals. Please, do come in,’ Otto politely offered.

The two robed cardinals walked in, taking in the detail of the command centre and the office with great interest, their hands clasped in front of themselves as they progressed. Helen stood behind her desk, offering a formal smile, Beesely off to one side in his wheelchair, his features neutral. The cardinals nodded formal greetings to Helen and Beesely in turn then sat where directed, the third man sitting besides them. He was suited, an olive skinned Italian in his late forties with black hair and piercing black eyes.

‘Would you like some refreshments?’ Otto offered.

‘We are fine, thank you,’ the first cardinal offered, speaking for the group in a slightly accented voice.

Otto closed the door. Gesturing, he named Helen and Beesely, adding Helen’s new job description after.

‘Welcome to Schloss Diane,’ Helen offered. ‘And apologies for the mess outside. We were hit by a ... cruise missile.’

‘We are aware,’ the first man offered. ‘I am Cardinal Rumon, this is Cardinal Duboir and Senor Molarini.’

‘A pleasure to meet you,’ Helen offered. ‘But we were not expecting you.’ She waited.

‘We were contacted by ... *mutual* friends ... who indicated that ... you may be in a position to ... *assist* us.’

Helen considered the statement. ‘And how ... *exactly*, may we ... *assist* you?’

‘In general terms, we are interested in *any*, and all, leads as to the whereabouts of ... *items*, and treasures, removed from Catholic churches during the Second World War.’

‘Under normal circumstances, Your Eminence, we would be more than happy to help. Not least because of the long history of friendship between Switzerland and The

Vatican, the role of the Swiss Guard and ... the general nature of what we do.'

'What you do?' the Rumon repeated with a formal smile.

'We fight terrorism, recover Nazi treasures and send them back to their rightful owners, without asking reward in return. I would have thought that ... you already knew that?'

Rumon lost his smug composure for just the briefest of moments. 'Until recently we knew very little of this... *organisation*.'

'And yet you have not enquired as to why there are British people sat here, not least myself, who's appointment here is known only to a handful of people in the world.' She waited.

Rumon stared back. 'As I said, our ... friends, informed us of some details, hence the visit.'

'Of course,' Helen said with an obviously false smile. 'But as I began to say, under *normal circumstances* ... we would help. The problem is this: we were infiltrated - quite expertly might I add - over many years, by seven men, all of whom had served in the Swiss Guard before joining this ... *organisation*. They succeeded in wounding several of our staff in a determined attempt to kill the banks new owner, Herr Johnno.'

'I do not see what such matters would have to do with us?'

'We captured many alive and, in the best traditions of this organisation, gave them *the chair*.' Both Cardinals fought well to maintain their composure. Helen continued, 'Some talked, claiming - strangely enough - to be agents of the Vatican, of all things.'

Rumon stared back. 'And what use might we have for... as you said, *agents*? We do not shoot people, nor do we instruct others to do so. We are men of God.'

'Which is what we would like to believe, Your Eminence. Unfortunately, all of the captured and killed men

had been in recent contact with certain individuals, traced back to the Vatican.'

Rumon seemed mildly annoyed. 'Our friends ... led us to believe that we would not be subjected to such false allegations, Dame Helen.'

'You may have ... misunderstood ... our relationship with our friends.' She tapped the phone. 'Dial that number.'

Two seconds later the mobile phone of the suited man, Molarini, started to ring, a classical orchestrated piece. Beesely watched closely as Molarini cut the call.

'That number, Your Eminence,' Helen delicately explained, 'was dialled by all of the conspirators in this recent attempt to kill the bank's owner, Mister Beesely's son.' She ended by gesturing to Beesely.

'I believe, Dame Helen, that we will not make any progress if these ... *unfounded* allegations are continued.'

She smiled. 'You're right. How would you like us to help?'

'We have heard that you have ... access to the caves possessed by Herr Shue —'

'The late Herr Shue,' she corrected. 'Our ... Herr Johnno threw him out of a rather lofty window.'

Rumon stared back. 'And we believe, in fact know for certain, that he dealt in stolen church treasures taken during the war.'

The door burst open and Johnno stepped in, trailed by Thomas. He went immediately to the fridge and grabbed a can of beer, Thomas rushing to Beesely.

Johnno clicked open the beer and rudely waved Helen out of the chair as Otto closed the door. He sat and stared at the three guests. 'You'll excuse the smell, we were just exploring some caves. Caves that had not been opened for five hundred years.' He took a swig. 'Or so Shue thought.'

'Johnno?' Beesely asked.

Johno did not take his gaze off Rumon. ‘After a long and arduous trek we found an empty chamber, with a few dead German soldiers in it, circa 1943.’

‘The German Army was inside?’ Otto puzzled.

Johno turned his head and nodded. ‘All that effort on Shue’s part, thirty years of hard work. *Someone* ... should have told him there was no treasure there, poor old lard arse.’

Rumon asked, ‘And what, exactly, did you find?’

‘Bunch of old stone coffins, all smashed up and defaced. Some defaced writing on the walls, couple of Germans.’

Rumon nodded. ‘And may *we* ... have access?’

‘I sealed the caves,’ Johno told him, a hard stare offered.

Rumon took a moment. ‘And why would you do such a thing.’

‘Radiation. Can’t risk anyone getting contaminated.’ He waited, sipping his drink.

Rumon glanced at his associates. Turning back to Johno he said, ‘May we, at least, look around the ... *safe* areas?’

‘Gentlemen, I believe in being frank - direct talking like the Americans. So I’ll be frank. There is that which has gone before, and that which will follow. A crossover, if you like. We are at that crossover. What has gone before, is finished ... we would hope. But just in case it is not finished a file has been stored with a solicitor, to be accessed upon my death, should I die at the hands of ... let’s say ... you arseholes!

The guests straightened, Otto closing his eyes.

‘That file contains photographs, video footage and witness statements, plus bits of rock, items of clothing, jewellery and the like. Should I die, at the hands of you lot, it goes to the most dangerous force on the planet - the British tabloid press. And then everyone will know what it was that you didn’t want known about in the chamber.’

Rumon lost his composure, Otto shifted in his seat and Helen stared wide-eyed at the floor.

‘Further more, should any of my friends, associates or employees be killed or injured by someone I suspect being linked to you, I will arrange for a hundred Catholic priests to be found guilty of child abuse. Should you fail to heed the warning - that will be a thousand!

He took a breath and a swig of beer. ‘Now, like I said, there is that which went before, and that which comes next. That which went before is closed. I think, and I hope, we understand each other.

‘What comes next is this. You send us an expert, a liaison officer. You detail for us what you think we could use our ... *skills* to recover, and we will recover it if we can. That will not cost you anything. And if you had asked nicely we would have attacked and killed Shue for you and sealed the caves without asking why. All the other treasures that we found we returned – free of charge!

‘You made a serious mistake in your judgement, gentlemen, a mistake that cost the lives of your people - good foot soldiers - and losses and injuries on our side. But I guess that large-scale mistakes... are to your taste.’ He eased back and swigged his beer. Nothing was said for ten seconds.

Rumon sighed. ‘You have made your point ... well. We will send such a person.’ They stood.

Johno quietly stated with a cold stare, ‘The man in the suit won’t be leaving. Some mistakes ... come at a price.’

Rumon stared dispassionately down at Johno, before glancing at Molarini for the briefest of moments. He lowered his head then stepped out, the second Cardinal following.

‘Your Grace?’ Molarini pleaded.

Johno put his pistol on the table, Molarini terrified. ‘Guards!’ Johno called.

Two troopers spun in, weapons brought to bear on Molarini.

‘Take him to the chair room, show him all the videos for at least seven days, check with me before doing anything to him.’

They led him out, the man now crying and trembling.

Johnno jumped up, offering the chair to Helen in a much brighter mood. ‘Sorry, had my poker face on, love.’

She sat. ‘Remind me *not* to play poker with you, stinky.’

Johnno sat next to Beesely. ‘Sorry about that.’

‘I wouldn’t have handled it any differently. You waved the big stick then gave them a way out. Perfect.’

‘And Molarini we’ll try and turn,’ Johnno suggested.

‘Ah, yes. Clever,’ Beesely offered.

Thomas stood staring at the door. ‘My God, Johnno, you shouted and swore at the Pope!’

Everyone focussed on the boy, Helen taking his hand and smiling. ‘Go and change. You’re a bit ... smelly.’

Still shocked, Thomas headed for the dungeon.

Johnno sipped his beer then made eye contact with Beesely. ‘Can you lot hold the fort for a few days?’

‘Yes,’ Beesely affirmed with a smile.

‘Helen,’ Johnno called. ‘There’s a bag packed in your room. Go check it, pack a bikini.’

She stared back, a questioning look. He stood, lifted her under the armpits and marched her to the door. ‘That’s an order!’

Otto closed in. ‘What was in the cave?’

‘Something you must never repeat after today.’ Johnno took a swig. ‘Nazi soldiers, defaced graves, boxes that held some treasure at some point, dead Jewish prisoners – digging tunnels probably – and a catholic priest, maybe a cardinal.’

‘Bloody hell,’ Beesely let out.

Otto shook his head. ‘There have been rumours of the Vatican searching for the Templar treasure during the war. Using Jewish labour would be an embarrassment.’

‘I hear we got Luchenkov?’ Johnno asked, Otto nodding. ‘From Malta I’ll pop over and see him.’

‘You off to Malta?’ Beesely enthused. ‘I know it very well.’

‘Taking Grey back, catching some sleep. How’s the building work?’

‘It will be finished when you return,’ Otto suggested. ‘Do not worry.’

‘The wounded sorted?’

‘Don’t concern yourself,’ Beesely pressed. ‘Get some rest, we’re on the case. And well done in Austria, a good strategy. You stacked the deck, covered the bases then tried the quiet approach. Excellent planning; big stick, quiet words - you take after me.’

‘Hah!’ Johnno stood, stepping to the door. ‘Skinny, bald, grumpy...’

* * *

Rumon waited till they had cleared the gate in their Limousine before speaking. ‘I like this man, Johnno. Plain, simple, strong like an Ox. He is warrior, and he sees the world through a warrior’s eyes. We must remember that facet of his character when making future plans.’

‘Yes.’

‘Is our principal still in place?’

‘Yes. Not suspected at all.’

‘Good. But we shall have to put pressure on our allies here. And soon.’

‘What of Molarini? He may talk.’

‘He was given a false statement, since I anticipated this many months ago. He *will* talk, and what he thinks is true will mislead them. If they act on that information it will destroy them.’

* * *

On the command centre walkway Otto met a concerned looking Blaum. Blaum stood at a confidential distance, waiting on Otto's next few words.

Otto said, 'There was no treasure in Shue's cave. Nothing.'

Blaum finally breathed, his chest heaving.

Otto added, 'And, apparently, the Vatican knew that fact, but let him continue with his obsession.'

'Then the files -'

'May still be hidden in Switzerland,' Otto whispered. 'Since they were taken from Basel, perhaps hidden there somewhere.'

Blaum lowered his head, looking visibly relieved. He nodded to himself for a moment before stepping away.

2

Kev and Mr. Grey stepped into Luchenkov's room, the occupant now strung up from the ceiling by his wrists and slowly swaying. The prisoner's hands and feet were bandaged, along with a knee and elbow, a patch over an eye.

'Ha yas doon?' Kev let out, closing in.

'What language is that?' Luchenkov asked, his words as distorted as Kev's due to the front part of his tongue being removed. He focused his remaining eye.

'Scottish. And you're about to feel some payback for a few buddies a mine.'

'I'll check in on Kirkpatrick,' Grey muttered, moving next door.

Kev lit a miniature blowlamp, a tiny blue flame. 'First, the girl's name was Sophie. That's six letters, so should only take about ten, fifteen minutes. An hour at worst.'

* * *

‘Eminence, Herr Johno from K2 flew directly to Malta after meeting with us.’

‘Malta?’ Rumon repeated, his concern clearly etched into his face. ‘He is either better informed than we thought, possibly making a joke, or he has taken this holiday at random.’

‘I do not believe in random choice where it concerns K2.’

‘Neither do I.’

‘Do we act?’

‘We dare not,’ Rumon suggested. ‘They will discredit our priests. *Others*, must act for us, in their own interests, without looking as if we had a hand.’

3

Three days later a tanned Mr. Grey kicked Johno’s bare foot.

Johno put a hand over his eyes, squinting up at Grey in the bright afternoon sun as he lay on the poolside terrace of the Radisson SAS Hotel, Golden Sands Bay, Malta. ‘Hey buddy. Was I snoring?’

‘I could hear you in Gozo!’ Grey joked as Johno eased up and stretched, dressed in shorts and t-shirt. ‘Need a chat, cold beer waiting inside.’

Helen turned her head and held a hand over her eyes. Grey waved toward her then followed Johno inside. The table Grey sat down at contained Elle and an elderly man.

‘Elle? Problems?’ Johno asked as he sat, eyeing the elder man.

‘Not really,’ Elle began. ‘This is my associate, Casper.’

Johno reached across and shook. ‘Solid enough for a ghost.’

‘Is that a ... spying term?’ the man asked,

Elle smiled. ‘No, Casper is a children’s TV ghost.’

‘Ah.’

‘So what brings you ... the short distance to Malta?’
Johno asked, grabbing his beer.

‘We hitched a lift with Mr. Grey after he ... *visited* some old friends in hospital with the man called Kev.’

The elder man was evidently not following.

Johno nodded. ‘It’s nice that I’m popular. What’s up?’

‘We have a request,’ Elle began. ‘A ... *firm*, request.’

‘Oh dear,’ Johno let out.

‘We have already received permission from Mr. Grey’s superiors to get a description of the inside of Shue’s chamber, which was helpful.’

‘Prisoners?’ Johno asked.

‘No,’ Casper cut in. ‘The Templar treasure.’

‘You want it as well, ay?’

The elder man explained, ‘They were not as ... *noble* as history romanticised them. For the most part they were thieves, murders and rapists –’

‘And they lost almost every military encounter,’ Johno finished off. ‘I know, I just read their history. So, what you guys are after is what they sacked from the temples in Israel?’

‘Very much so,’ Casper suggested.

‘I reckon the Vatican has it,’ Johno suggested. ‘They got pissy before because of the idea getting out of Vatican priests going on digs with Nazis and using forced labour. I don’t think it was about the treasure.’

‘Young man, I am reasonably certain that they *do not* have it.’

Johno sipped his beer, studying the stranger. ‘So what if we find it and *they* want it?’ Johno posed.

Elle forced a diplomatic smile. ‘We would be ... most displeased.’

‘Then I’ll make it easy for you. Stanton can decide, since I don’t actually give a fuck about ancient treasure.’ He eased forwards. ‘I care about the ... *here and now*, peoples lives, and my men getting killed.’

He sat back. 'But I'll make you this promise. If I find it, and I think for a minute that its release will stir up religious trouble ... *anywhere*, I'll destroy the fucking lot. Especially since some of it was sacked from Mosques in Jerusalem. Clear?'

'Quite clear,' the old man unhappily commented.

'There is something you should know, as you progress in your search,' Elle began. 'There may exist an early version of the Christian bible, somewhat different from later versions. Gold bound and sealed in a box. *That*, is what the Vatican fears.'

Johno sipped his beer. 'And the ... release of this early book would beat Dan Brown up the book charts?'

'Oh yes,' Elle firmly suggested.

'Then should I find it, old buddy, I'll destroy it on sight,' Johno said with a menacing smile.

'Why?' the old man delicately enquired. 'I understand you are not a believer.'

'I'm not. But why upset people for no reason. If people want to believe that God sits in the moon - and that helps them get through the day - then fine, we all have our crutches. There're what ... a billion Christians out there? Be a lot of unhappy fuckers if Jesus didn't die on the cross and moved to France to open a ladies fashion shop. So why rock the boat?'

Elle and the old man exchanged looks. Elle said, 'We are sure the treasure is in Switzerland or Austria, moved when the Templars were attacked. At the time there were noblemen with small kingdoms not aligned to the King of France or the Pope. Some believe, quite firmly, that some of the treasure went by boat from Perpignan to Genoa, then inland to the mountains. Part is known to have been *found* during the Second World War, possibly now in some Swiss vault.'

'You had my answer.'

Elle slowly nodded to himself. 'And we will be sending you what we know about it and its location.'

Johno faced Grey. 'Do you ever get the feeling that you're not getting through?'

Grey grinned. 'I'd like to tackle the caves in Zug. *Boss.*'

Johno stood, maintaining eye contact with Grey. 'You can ride back with us in a few days, *Underling*. No one looks till then, I've stopped the search till I get back.'

'We know,' Elle suggested, standing. 'We asked Beesely, who told us - quite firmly- to talk to you.'

Johno studied Elle for a moment, before offering a hand to the elder man. 'You can visit and poke around if you like.'

'I would like that very much.'

Johno went back to his sunbathing, plonking down and sighing loudly.

'Problems?' Helen asked.

'Yep. Everyone thinks the Templar treasure is in Switzerland, maybe even in Zug. And they all want it. *Or else.*'

'So much for the relaxing break.' She sat up. 'You know, there is a little Jewish olive grove just over there.' She pointed to the far side of the bay, at the top of the cliffs. 'Thomas found it. There's a sign, apparently.'

Johno lit up. 'If it's OK with you we head back tomorrow. War's back on.'

As Johno swam in the gentle surf of Golden Bay beach a man swam close. Bald, sixty and heavily tanned, he called, 'You are Johno.' It was a statement, not a question, the man's accent familiar: German speaking Swiss.

Johno eyed the man, K2 agents close by. 'Who're you?'

'I have some information for you. I know ... everything.'

Two days later Beesely motored himself into the office, surprised to find quite a crowd gathering. 'Meeting?' he asked Otto, surprised by some of the faces in the room.

'Johno arranged this,' Otto explained. 'He will be here shortly. And I believe we should be concerned.'

'Oh?'

'He met with Mossad. And after ... this.'

'Oh hell.'

Beesely waved to many he knew, shook hands with Kev, was mildly startled by the heavily pregnant Hilda then greeted numerous wounded troopers and guards, including big Simon.

The tourists stepped in, heavily tanned. Oddly, Johno offered no greetings, he just sat in his usual chair. 'We all here?' he curtly asked as Helen sat.

Claus walked around to him. 'Everyone you requested is here. Papers are ready.' Of the managers, he was the only one present.

'Close the door,' Johno firmly ordered, rubbing his eyes. Lifting a pen off the desk he counted the heads, twelve in total. 'OK, hope you can all hear me. We have some problems ... problems that I am hoping you lot will help with. I would like each of you to do something for me, for the bank. Kev, front and centre.'

Kev stood and stepped to the desk, his wounds mostly healed.

'Kev, I would like to lend you a large sum of money. I would then like you to travel to another country, any one, but at least a few hundred miles from here. Maybe the Caribbean, maybe Panama or Brazil, maybe Australia ... or even Scotland if you like.

'When you're there I want you to buy a small hotel, or estate, with the money we give you. That property, or business, will be in *your* name, not ours. Your aim is to make a reasonable investment, don't go losing the money,

but you will have a fifty thousand pound a year salary, plus any reasonable expenses on security. At least one K2 guard will go with you and they'll be rotated.

'The hotel you buy will have rooms reserved for K2 agents and visitors, plus suitable accommodation for K2 agents on the run, hidden areas, escape routes. You'll get to know the local area, bribe the local police and officials, creating a little K2 home from home.

'The money we give you is to be hidden, invested, property bought in the name of your pet dog. And all you have to then do ... is kick back and enjoy life, safeguarding our investment. You think you could do it?'

Kev shrugged. 'Ay, simple. Always fancied a wee castle with a salmon farm.'

'Perfect. Claus, the first paper.' Claus handed Kev the page. 'You're now worth twenty million quid,' Johnno told him. 'You leave today.'

'Pleasure doing business with you,' Kev said with a smile, sitting down.

'Mickey,' Johnno called, pointing. Mickey Morgan stood, an arm missing. 'Cayman Islands.'

Claus handed him a page, earnestly read.

'Simon. You up to it, or you want to stay here?'

Simon stood, thinking carefully. 'I cannot use my left arm fully, so I'm never going to shoot well again. Pistol maybe -'

'Listen, this is important to us as well, maybe more so than you being here.'

'I will do what you ask,' he stoically offered, his chin out. He accepted a page, detailing a Swiss bank account. 'But where do you want me to go?'

'Where do you fancy?'

'I have family in Canada.'

'Excellent. Canadian hotel with good fishing.'

Simon sat.

'Hilda?'

She stood. 'Why I am included in this?'

'Because I think I can trust you. And we owe Ricky. And... it's probably not safe for you to stay here.'

She accepted a page. 'I will buy something in Malvern and educate the child in England. His family should see the baby, I have no family alive.'

'Sounds reasonable.'

Two K2 guards chose to stay, the rest set off on their travels. Finally they were all gone, Claus closing the door as he stepped out. Otto stood and faced Johnno, awaiting an explanation.

'Something I've been thinking about for a while. Since that cruise missile hit actually.'

'We're centred here,' Beesely pointed out. 'An obvious target.'

'And if we ever get kicked out of Switzerland –'

'You have many fall back positions around the world,' Helen stated.

'Yes, clever,' Beesely commended. 'You don't know, but Otto has already set-up a bank in Panama with a rather large sum in it. Just in case.'

'Yeah, well I think that *just in case* is just around the fucking corner. Helen, you may just collect your first month's pay – if you're lucky. And what the fuck happened to Mountney?'

'Vanished off the face of the Earth,' Beesely informed Johnno.

'Which is strange, given the agencies we're *supposed* to be friends with? If he can't be found *someone* is sheltering him –'

'Or *someone* disposed of him effectively,' Helen put in.

'Which suggests,' Beesely began, 'that there may have been more to the attack on the UK than we think.'

'Ma'am?' came from the desk phone.

'Yes,' Helen answered.

'There's a Sir Charles Robbins, Director of MI6 calling.'

Helen glanced at Beesely. ‘*Who ... is he calling for?*’

‘For whoever is head of K2, Ma’am.’

Johno waved Helen out of her seat and plonked down. ‘This is Johno. If anyone enquires from the UK, I’m head of K2. Put him through.’

After a moment came, ‘Is that ... Johno?’

‘Yes, Sir Charles. How can I help?’

‘First, I’d like to say it’s a pleasure, if not an honour, to finally talk to you. On behalf of *all* the interested parties here, thanks for all you have done, and the money sent to Portsmouth. We are *seriously* in your debt.’

‘We know our roots.’

‘How is Beesely?’

Johno glanced at Beesely, sat in his motorised wheelchair. ‘Had a stroke, not well, in hospital mostly, I’ve taken over. How can I help?’

‘Firstly, a delicate matter. We have lost contact with Dame Helen, last seen heading your way. Might I enquire if you know where she is?’

‘She’s here.’

Helen did not react.

‘And might I enquire as to what she is doing ... there?’

‘We’ve had a long standing romantic interest we kept quiet.’

Helen glared, her mouth opening.

‘Oh ... er ... Oh. Umm...’ came from the desk phone.

Johno checked his watch. ‘Was there something else?’

‘Well, as you can imagine, for Dame Helen to be ... associated closely with an organisation like yours ... will raise some eyebrows over here ... in the Government.’

‘Tough shit. I care about her, so anyone showing an interest will pay a very heavy price for that interest.’

‘Oh ... er ... I see. Well, I’d like to pop over at some point, have a chat.’

‘Fine, let us know, we’ll send a Learjet for you.’

‘That’s good of you, but I’ll have to take a domestic flight – can’t be seen to be taking gifts from foreign agencies, as you can imagine.’

‘Whatever. Your call. Anything else?’

‘No, no ... that’s ... er ... all. I’ll pencil in a meeting. Thank you once again for all you’ve done.’ The line went dead.

‘Long standing –’ Helen began.

‘Clever,’ Beesely cut in with. ‘If they think you like Helen they don’t dare upset her, and she doesn’t appear to be working here, even thou she lives here. Clever, my boy.’

Helen eased her head forwards. ‘And now people in the UK think I was cheating on my husband!’

‘Do you care?’ Johnno curtly asked.

‘Some, yes,’ she snapped. ‘My reputation is bad enough already!’

‘Yeah, well worry about that after you’ve survived a month here.’

A manager stepped in and handed Otto a note. Otto read it quickly. ‘The British Prime Minister *will not* be entering his name to the leadership contest, first vote in two days.’

‘Just as well,’ Beesely commented.

‘He is blaming elements of MI5 for leaking certain facts,’ Otto added.

‘Rawlins is the main culprit, then,’ Johnno noted, disinterested.

‘Some suggestion from the reporter, Duncan, that Rawlins *was* the main culprit,’ Beesely pointedly informed Johnno. ‘He acted even before you did!’

Epilogue

Stanton read the note a few days later. ‘Clever.’

‘But also a problem –’

‘Should they step out of line. Yes, I can see that. But the one thing we should never do is underestimate them. They have a hell of a team. Beesely, Otto, Johno and now Dame Helen – hell of a line-up.’

* * *

Cardinal Rumon read the report. ‘This is a set-back.’

‘Greatly so,’ his assistant commented. ‘If I may say so, they have been very cunning.’

Rumon turned. ‘It is almost as if they know what is coming. That is a worry, they seemed to have been a step ahead at every turn.’

‘Perhaps just co-incidence, or good planning?’

‘Let us hope so. But we are moving closer to the – what did they say after the nerve agent attack – *end game*?’

* * *

Molarini had watched ‘the chair’ films for five days before his torture began, his guards informing him that he was to be kept alive indefinitely. After an hour he was ready to talk.

Johno listened to just two sentences before putting a bullet through Molarini’s head. Straightening, he informed the surprised guards, ‘Now the war really begins.’

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